

ICELANDIC MIGRATION TO CANADA, 1872-1875:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE
'MYTH OF BEGINNINGS'

by

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ABSTRACT

Between 1870 and 1914, approximately 20,000 Icelanders migrated to North America. In sharp contrast to other Scandinavian national groups, the vast majority went to Canada rather than the United States. This study examines the development of this Canada-centred migration pattern during the years 1872-1875. Its first purpose is to integrate Icelandic migration into broader global and local contexts using neglected sources from the National Archives of Canada and the Archives of Ontario. Its second purpose is to deconstruct several of the most common mythic stories about leaving home, travelling, sojourning, and settling that have appeared in Icelandic ethnic histories, and to explain how these stories were constructed and used by people of Icelandic descent in Canada to forge ethnic and national identities. It is argued that there was an important difference between the historical imaginings of the immigrant and Canadian-born generations that is not usually acknowledged in scholarly examinations of Icelandic-Canadian historical myth.

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I am sadly representative of most people of Icelandic descent in my poor knowledge of the Icelandic language. This has necessitated my reliance on two excellent translators in order to access key primary documents. Ragnar Hjálmarsson from the

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INTRODUCTION

'THE MYTH OF BEGINNINGS'

History is not just a record of what happened, where, and on what day. History is not out there somewhere, still happening, still accessible, weighted with truth. Instead, history is something we construct out of artifacts, memories, traces of the past that was once a present but is no more.¹

In the preface to their eclectic collection of historical documents, photographs, essays, stories, and poetry *The New Icelanders: A North American Community*, University of Manitoba English Professor David Arnason and his son Vincent explained that in assembling their sources they had found inconsistencies between documents describing the same events, and divergent historical interpretations that could not easily be reconciled. Their solution was to “relinquish truth” and provide a set of sources about the Icelandic experience in North America that would allow readers to engage with the past and “make [their] own history.”² The idea that it mattered little whether these constructions were ‘true’ was new to the historical writing of people of Icelandic descent, but the practice of mining the past for themes and images relevant to present concerns has been a feature of Icelandic-Canadian historiography since Icelandic migrants first put pen to paper to write about their group’s migration and settlement in the late nineteenth century.

Professional historians have had little hand in the writing of this history. Amateur historians of Icelandic descent, usually members of the educated elite, have been the primary producers of historical knowledge about the group’s past. Most of these histories are rich in narrative detail, and exhibit the products of extensive research and careful

¹ David Arnason and Vincent Arnason, preface to David Arnason and Vincent Arnason, eds., *The New Icelanders: A North American Community* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), vii.

² Ibid.

writing. However, they generally adopt a Whiggish narrative view emphasizing material progress and triumph over adversity.³ The types of sources deemed important and the information considered worth recording have thus been constrained by the need to demonstrate this process unfolding. Icelandic-Canadian writers have used their past to forge a positive self-image for their ethnic group, and to help define its relationships with the ancestral and adopted homelands.⁴ This urgent need to find relevance in the past for defining identities in the present has often produced mythic versions of the group's early migration and settlement history. Quite often, these myths do not correspond with the documentary evidence.

The purpose of this study is to deconstruct these mythic stories, and offer a new perspective that helps to explain why they have had such significance for the people of Icelandic descent in Canada. Chapters one through four will focus on key myths that Icelandic writers have used to imagine the process of leaving home, travelling, sojourning, and settling in the new world. The aim is to develop a counter-narrative of how a pattern of Icelandic migration to Canada developed between 1872 and 1875 by comparing Icelandic accounts with previously neglected sources from the host country. Recent insights into the study of migration and ethnicity, particularly 'the systems approach' developed by Dirk Hoerder and others,⁵ will provide the theoretical base for this investigation into the beginning of Icelandic migration to Canada.

³ Anne Brydon, "Dreams and Claims: Icelandic-Aboriginal Interactions in the Manitoba Interlake," *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, 36, 2 (Summer 2001), 167.

⁴ Kirsten Wolf, "Emigration and Mythmaking: The Case of the Icelanders in Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Études ethniques au Canada*, 33, 2 (2001), 10-11.

⁵ See Dirk Hoerder, "From Immigration to Migration Systems: New Concepts in Migration History," *OAH Magazine of History*, 14, 1 (Fall 1999): 5-11.

Such a deconstruction project would be of little significance if it did not address the social function of the myths among people of Icelandic descent. Chapter five will draw together the insights of the previous chapters to explain the contexts in which the myths were created, and the significance of the mythic narratives for how their creators imagined their ethnic community. The growing literature on the role of myth in forging ethnic and national identities developed by writers such as Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson provides useful insights into the Icelandic experience in North America.⁶ A brief outline of the history of the Icelanders in Canada, their myths, and the contours of the historiography that helped shape those myths, is first necessary in order to launch this two-pronged investigation into the Icelandic-Canadian past.

Icelandic historian Helgi Skúli Kjartansson has estimated that approximately 20,000 Icelanders emigrated between 1873 and 1905. This figure represented twenty to twenty-five percent of the country's population, a proportion comparable to emigration rates in Britain or Sweden during the same period.⁷ Married couples with children, often travelling with single servants or relatives, account for the highest proportion of Icelandic migrants. Sex distribution for the entire emigration period was virtually even, with women accounting for 50.8 percent of migrants.⁸ Wisconsin attracted the first small groups of migrants, but in 1873 and 1874 several hundred people went to Canada, settling first in Ontario before moving to Manitoba and Nova Scotia in 1875.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Some key Canadian works influenced by their approach include Norman Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: The Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance, eds., *Myth, Migration, and the Making of Memory* (Halifax: Fernwood Press, 1999).

⁷ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration," in P.C. Emmer and M. Mörner, eds, *European Expansion and Migration, Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe* (New York: Berg, 1992), 108.

⁸ *Ibid.* 107, 113.

The New Iceland region on the southwestern shores of Lake Winnipeg is perhaps the most famous of the Icelandic settlements in North America. Founded in 1875, it was plagued by problems from the outset. A smallpox epidemic in 1876, bitterly cold winters, and periodic flooding forced out most of the original settlers in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Later waves of immigration in the last two decades of the nineteenth century repopulated New Iceland, and it remains today one of the most significant Icelandic settlements in North America. Out-migrants from New Iceland founded settlements in North Dakota, Winnipeg and southwestern Manitoba. In the early 1880s, the older communities in Wisconsin and Nova Scotia were gradually abandoned as Icelanders moved west, establishing prosperous settlements in Minnesota, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, and Washington State that were supplemented by later migrants from Iceland.⁹ By the outbreak of the First World War, Icelandic immigration to North America had largely ceased due to improved living conditions in Iceland, and it never resumed on a mass scale in later years.

A general willingness to integrate into the broader society while retaining aspects of the Icelandic heritage has characterized the ethnic experience of the Icelanders in North America. Use of the ancestral language has been in a steep decline since the 1930s, and most do not live in homogeneous Icelandic communities. According to the 1991 Census of Canada, 63,340 Canadians reported being of Icelandic descent. Of these, only 14,555 claimed to be of wholly Icelandic ancestry, and fewer than 3,000 of those reported Icelandic as their mother tongue.¹⁰ During the late nineteenth century, Icelandic emigrants were referred to as *Vestur Íslendingar* (West or Western Icelanders) by those

⁹ Anne Brydon, "Icelanders," in Robert Paul Magocsi, ed., *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*, (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario and University of Toronto Press, 1999), 687.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 686, 692.

who remained behind. Many emigrants adopted this name, but its use declined around the Second World War when the more national-specific “Icelandic-Canadian” and “Icelandic-American” came into common usage among the well-integrated descendants of the original migrants. In this study, *Western Icelandic* will generally be used in reference to emigrants, while *Icelandic-Canadian* will refer to their Canadian-born descendants.

In spite of their thorough integration into Canadian society, people of Icelandic descent continue to maintain a cultural presence in Canada fostered through festivals, ethnic organizations, and periodicals. David Arnason has argued that most people of Icelandic descent find their historic roots in a common epic narrative of migration and settlement that he calls the “myth of beginnings.”¹¹ According to Arnason’s narrative, the Icelanders left their island home due to disastrous volcanic eruptions that displaced a wide cross-section of the population. An offer from Governor General Lord Dufferin resulted in the tide of Icelandic emigration being directed to Canada, and the immigrants spent a restless year in Ontario before heading west to Manitoba. Their leaders selected a bloc of land on the shores of Lake Winnipeg that the government granted to them as an exclusive colony—a New Iceland—where they would be free to preserve their language and culture for all time. The community they built in the wilderness was unique in the history of Canadian immigration; it was a miniature republic with a surprising degree of autonomy from the Canadian authorities. The New Iceland settlers suffered through hunger, cold, an epidemic of smallpox, and a divisive religious controversy that split the community. Many people left and founded Icelandic settlements, but enduring bonds of

¹¹ David Arnason, “The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings,” in *The New Icelanders: A North American Community*, 8.

family, kinship, and culture have kept the far-flung Icelanders connected after more than a century.¹² Arnason states that while many of the details of the myth of beginnings might be disputed, it is imbued with a “mythic truth” that helps unite the Icelandic community—a social function he feels is far more important than the question of whether or not the details can be empirically verified.¹³

Arnason’s myth is not pure invention. It is derived from interpretations of the past that have appeared in the community’s written historiography for over a century. The Icelandic community has produced no shortage of individuals concerned with documenting the group’s past. Religious and secular leaders, professionals, journalists, poets, and genealogists have all been actively involved in history writing. In surveying this varied literature, four overlapping chronological periods provide useful signposts: commemorative settlement narratives (c. 1898-1926), Icelandic language ethnic histories (c. 1919-1953), English language ethnic histories (c. 1929-1970), and recent approaches (c. 1970 to the present). The historiography of other ethnic groups in Canada has followed a similar pattern, but a unique Icelandic flavour has both enlivened and impeded writing of the group’s history.

Iceland has a rich tradition of genealogy and family history that makes it possible for most Icelanders to trace their ancestry back many centuries, some even as far as the Viking Age.¹⁴ This tradition began c. 1100 CE with the compilation of the *Íslendingabók*

¹² Ibid., 3.

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ During the 1990s, a genealogical database called *Íslendingabók* (The Book of Icelanders) was developed by the Icelandic biotechnology company DeCODE Genetics. The database includes information on half of the Icelanders who have ever lived, including 95 percent of individuals since 1703, the year of the first census. DeCODE argues that Iceland’s rich genealogical record provides a unique opportunity to study genetic diseases among the country’s relatively homogeneous population.

The database has recently been made public in Iceland. By typing in the Icelandic equivalent of Canada’s social insurance number, Icelandic citizens can access their full genealogical record, and find out

(Book of Icelanders), an early history of the first Icelanders, and the *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), a record of the settlement of the country. These were followed in the thirteenth century by the Icelandic family sagas, one of the cornerstones of Icelandic culture. The sagas have had a profound influence on how generations of literate Icelanders relate to the past. For many centuries the sagas were considered to be literal descriptions of the past, but more recently they have been interpreted as mythic constructions of an imagined past, written several centuries after the events they described, and reflecting the contemporary concerns of their authors.¹⁵ The sagas document the lives of a host of individual Icelanders, and go into great detail in describing interconnected webs of family and community. This was part of the cultural baggage that Icelanders brought with them to North America, and its influence is often readily apparent.¹⁶ The overwhelming majority of the migrants were literate, and during the early twentieth century a vibrant Icelandic language press flourished in Winnipeg.

Historical narratives about migration and settlement first appeared in Icelandic periodicals published in Canada.¹⁷ The most significant of these early efforts were the settlement histories published in the *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* annually between 1898 and 1954. Each edition typically contained one or two brief histories of the Icelandic communities scattered across Canada and the United States, often written by

how they are related to any other person in the database. See "The Book of Icelanders," *deCode Genetics* website (Reykjavík, Iceland: deCODE Genetics, 2003, accessed 5 May 2003); available on: <http://www.decode.com/main/view.jsp?branch=43019>.

¹⁵ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* (London: Yale University Press, 1964), 51-64.

¹⁶ Dirk Hoerder, *Creating Societies: Immigrant Lives in Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1999), 22. Hoerder uses George Houser, ed. and trans., *Helgi Einarsson, A Manitoba Fisherman*, (Winnipeg: Queenston House, 1982).

¹⁷ The first, "Compendium of Items Concerning the Settlement of Icelanders at New Iceland" by Jóhann Briem, appeared in the 10 December 1877 of *Framfari* (Progress), the first Icelandic language newspaper in North America. The complete run of *Framfari* is available in English translation in a single volume: George Houser, ed. and trans., *Framfari 1877 to 1880* (Gimli, MB: Icelandic National League, 1986).

one of the early settlers in the community. They included a general history of the economic, political, cultural, and religious life of the settlement, followed by biographies of the settlers. The inclusiveness of these histories is quite remarkable; more prosperous members of the community received extensive treatment, but at least some mention was accorded to most people. Thorleifur Jackson's three-volume history of New Iceland was similarly structured, but also included emigrant letters.¹⁸ Personal narratives appeared in the *Álmanak* and in Jackson's books, and some, such as Guðbrandur Erlendsson's account of the Icelandic settlements in Nova Scotia, were published on their own.¹⁹

Because most of their authors took part in the events described, these settlement narratives have held a special claim to authority among later historians attempting to sketch out the broader patterns and retrospective significance of the Icelandic migration and settlement story. The histories of the Icelanders produced between the end of the First World War and the Canadian centennial in 1967 mythologize the pioneer experience. With one notable exception, the writers were the children of immigrants, and in telling the story of 'their people' they used the past to construct a flattering self-image for their community in the present.²⁰ Prior to 1950, most of these histories were written in the Icelandic language for an Icelandic audience on both sides of the Atlantic, and had a transnational focus on the 'the west' or 'the western home' (*Vesturheimi*) as opposed to either Canada or the United States. The most influential of these was Þorsteinn Þ.

¹⁸ Thorleifur Jackson, *Brot af landnámssögu Nýja Íslands*. (1919), *Frá Austri til Vesturs* (1921), and *Framhald á Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands* (1923). All three books were published in Winnipeg by the Columbia Press. Thorleifur's daughter continued his work with a similar volume on the North Dakota Icelanders: Thorstina Jackson, *Saga Íslendinga í Norður Dakota* (Winnipeg: The City Printing & Publishing Co., 1926).

¹⁹ Guðbrandur Erlendsson, *Markland: Endurminningar frá Árunum 1875-1881* (Winnipeg: Prentsmiðja Columbia Press, 1916).

²⁰ Wolf, 4.

Þorsteinsson's five-volume series *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Story of the Icelanders in the West).²¹

The Icelandic language histories and the earlier *Álmanak* and Thorleifur Jackson histories are cited in the references of the English-language ethnic historians whose works appeared between 1953 and 1970.²² The decision to tell the story in English was made self-consciously to inform the wider society about Icelandic-Canadians' past, present, and future potential. All of these writers used their telling of the past to stress the value of the Icelandic heritage to the host society, and replaced the older generation's transnational scope with more specific national and provincial studies showing the contributions of the Icelanders to the project of nation building in specific contexts. Four such studies appeared between 1953 and 1967. Thorstina Walters's 1953 monograph *Modern Sagas: the Story of the Icelanders in North America* was the first. It is the only comprehensive study of the Icelanders in the United States, particularly those residing within the state of North Dakota.²³ Walter J. Lindal's *The Saskatchewan Icelanders: A Strand in the Canadian Fabric*, a commemorative volume commissioned by the Saskatchewan government to celebrate the province's fiftieth anniversary, followed two years later.²⁴ Wilhelm Kristjanson wrote his *The Icelanders in Manitoba: A Manitoba*

²¹ See Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Winnipeg: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1940). University of Manitoba History Professor Tryggvi J. Oleson compiled the final two volumes of the series.

²² The earliest examples of English language history writing are: Angantyr Arnason, "Icelandic Settlements in America" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1929); and Olöf Sigurdson, "Icelandic Settlements in Manitoba and other points in America with a brief outline of Icelandic history" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1929).

²³ Thorstina Walters, *Modern Sagas: the Story of the Icelanders in North America* (Fargo, ND: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953).

²⁴ Walter J. Lindal, *The Saskatchewan Icelanders: A Strand in the Canadian Fabric* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1955).

Saga during the 1950s,²⁵ but it was not published until a decade later.²⁶ When Kristjanson's book was finally released in 1965, Walter Lindal was in the process of compiling a volume on the Icelanders for the 'Canada Ethnica' series funded by the federal government. *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* was released in time for centennial celebrations in 1967.²⁷

The interpretive tone of the English language histories produced by Walters, Lindal, and Kristjanson was not at all unique in the historiography of immigration and ethnicity in Canada; many ethnic communities produced similar works during the period. According to Franca Iacovetta, they generally included such elements as "...romanticized accounts of the culture and homelands of origin, culturally determinist characterizations of their people emphasizing their proud, intelligent, and stoic qualities as well as their genius for 'success' (variously defined)...."²⁸ Prior to the appearance of these histories, Canadian immigration history centred almost entirely around academic works on policy and the reception of immigrants by the host society.²⁹ Roberto Perin has noted that while the ethnic histories helped move the field beyond this limited perspective, they were generally disappointing efforts that flattened conflict, downplayed hardship, and displayed a startling degree of insensitivity to the broader Canadian context.³⁰

²⁵ Typescripts of early versions of Kristjanson's book from the 1950s are located at the Archives of Manitoba (hereafter AM), Wilhelm Kristjanson, MG9 A79.

²⁶ Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965).

²⁷ Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Ottawa: the National Printers, 1967).

²⁸ Franca Iacovetta, *The Writing of English Canadian Immigrant History* (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1997), 3.

²⁹ For example, see Norman Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966).

³⁰ Roberto Perin, "Writing about Ethnicity," in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1990), 206-207.

Over the past thirty years, historians have used new approaches to study immigration and ethnicity. As Iacovetta points out, migration studies has developed as a branch of the 'new social history'; 'top-down' studies of policy and nativistic reaction from the host society have been replaced by 'bottom-up' analyses emphasizing the lives and strategies of ordinary people. Historians have attempted to reconstruct the economic, material, emotional, and social world of migrants by integrating perspectives from the sending and receiving societies.³¹ Major themes of this literature have included migration and settlement patterns, work and labour relations, and gendered immigration. Since 1980, international scholarship has emphasized the importance of integrating micro-studies of specific migrant communities into their broader global economic contexts.³² Micro and macro migration systems—defined as clustered moves between a place of origin and a receiving region that continue over a period of time—have provided a particularly useful conceptual model. Whether explicitly using this model or not, the new immigration and ethnic history has sought to demonstrate that migrants were not simply passive victims of economic and social forces beyond their control, but exhibited considerable agency in exploiting available opportunities.³³

Writing on the Icelandic migration since 1970 has not reflected these broader historiographical developments. People of Icelandic descent working outside of universities have continued to be the main producers of historical knowledge about their

³¹ Iacovetta, 5.

³² Leslie Page Moch, introduction to Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, eds., *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 4.

³³ Some of the key examples of the new immigration and ethnic history in the Canadian context include: Bruce S. Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988); Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

past. Since the late 1970s, countless local histories of varying quality have been published.³⁴ Few of these have approached the level of research and empirical precision achieved by local historian and genealogist Nelson Gerrard. His exhaustive *Icelandic River Saga* (1985) synthesized a wide range of Icelandic primary and secondary written material, as well as countless oral sources, in telling the story of the Icelandic River district in New Iceland.³⁵ However, Gerrard's focus on the development of a specific rural community and the lives of its residents limits the space devoted to sketching out the broader contexts and significance of the community's experience.

Scholars in Iceland are largely responsible for the few academic treatments of Icelandic migration that have been produced to date. Most of this work was done during the 1970s when the centennial of the emigration period prompted interest in the field. Historians Jónús H. Kristinsson (1973) and Helgi Skúli Kjartansson (1976) produced influential dissertations on Icelandic emigration that utilized extensive quantitative data.³⁶ Kristinsson later compiled a nominal register of 14,268 emigrants who left during in the 1870-1914 period based on parish registers and passenger lists.³⁷ Their work provided valuable new insights into the background, process, and course of emigration in Iceland, but offered no new perspectives on the Icelanders' experience in Canada and the United States. Jónas Þór's 1980 MA thesis added a new perspective on the place of religion

³⁴ See for example, Gimli Women's Institute, *Gimli Saga* (Gimli, MB: Gimli Women's Institute, 1975); Lundar and District Historical Society, *Wagons to Wings: History of Lundar and Districts, 1872-1980* (Lundar, MB: Lundar and District Historical Society, 1980).

³⁵ Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985). Gerrard is expected to release a three-volume history of the Gimli district in the near future.

³⁶ Both remain unpublished although Kjartansson has summarized his work in three articles: Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "The Onset of Emigration from Iceland," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 9, 1-2 (1977): 87-93; "Emigrant Fares and Emigration from Iceland to North America, 1874-1893," *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 28, 1 (1980): 53-71; "Icelandic Emigration," in P.C. Emmer and M. Mörner, eds., *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe*, 105-119.

³⁷ Jónús H. Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of the Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983).

among the Icelandic immigrants,³⁸ but almost no further work influenced by the new social history has followed in its wake.

Two recent survey histories by Icelandic authors have not brought any new theoretical or methodological perspectives to bear on the study of Icelandic migration and settlement. Icelandic journalist Guðjón Arngrímsson's popular history *Nýja Ísland: the Saga of the Journey to New Iceland* revisited the standard printed primary sources in Icelandic, and attempted to synthesize the work of Kjartansson, Kristinsson, Gerrard, and the Icelandic-Canadian ethnic writers for a general Icelandic audience.³⁹ Much more disappointing is Jónas Þór's 2002 survey history *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers*, published by the University of Manitoba Press.⁴⁰ Þór's book is primarily drawn from the *Álmanak* histories and Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson's *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*.⁴¹ At best, this serves to make these Icelandic sources available to an English audience; at worst, it results in a slavish repetition of their perspectives. The only section that is based on original primary research is that condensed from his MA thesis.⁴²

This problem with Þór's work points to the key reason why the study of the Icelandic migration and settlement has been such an underdeveloped field. Perhaps surprisingly, the wealth of printed primary sources left by the migrant generation has hindered the development of new perspectives. The comprehensive body of sources left

³⁸ Jónas Þór [Jonas Thor], "A Religious Controversy among Icelandic Immigrants in North America, 1874-1880" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1980).

³⁹ Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: The Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000). Arngrímsson's book was originally published in Iceland, in Icelandic, in 1997. It was republished in English translation to commemorate the 125 anniversary of New Iceland in 2000.

⁴⁰ Jonas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 273-287.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 43-60, 110-129.

by the original migrants has provided an empirical base that few historians have felt compelled to move beyond. Most writers have found it more convenient to return to these sources time and again rather than to question their interpretations by examining alternative sources. Apart from the work of Helgi Skúli Kjartansson in Iceland, this has resulted in a blinkered vision of the past that is largely silent on the broader contexts into which the story fits.

One aspect of the Icelandic experience that has been much better treated in recent years is the social function of myth among people of Icelandic descent. Literary scholars Kirsten Wolf and Daisy Neijmann, and anthropologist Anne Brydon have identified and explicated several common myths about emigration and settlement.⁴³ Their work has started with the assumption that mythic constructions of the past are developed to meet needs grounded in the present. In the case of the Icelanders in Canada, it has been the need to establish or maintain positive self-image that they cite as the primary motivation behind the formulation of myths. Brydon uses aspects of the theories of nationalism forwarded by Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, particularly the idea that histories play an important role in fashioning national and ethnic identities.⁴⁴ She begins her piece with Anderson's statement, "All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives."⁴⁵ Neijmann and Wolf offer reasons why they believe particular Icelandic-Canadian myths have been significant, but only Brydon looks at the

⁴³ See Wolf, "Heroic Past-Heroic Present: Western Icelandic Literature," *Scandinavian Studies*, 63 (1991): 432-452, and "Emigration and Mythmaking....," 1-15; Daisy Neijmann, *The Icelandic Voice in Canadian Letters: The Contribution of Icelandic-Canadian Writers to Canadian Literature* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997), 75-78; Brydon, "Dreams and Claims....," 164-190.

⁴⁴ Brydon, "Dreams, 167.

⁴⁵ Anderson, 204.

construction of a specific narrative by exploring some of its silences, and by establishing the specific historical contexts in which the myth has been created and used. This approach is the basis of this study of how a pattern of Icelandic migration to Canada developed, and how that experience has been variously imagined by the descendants of the original migrants.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued that citing examples where the past has been constructed is not enough; we must also uncover the historical process of how narratives about the past have been constructed.⁴⁶ His insights into the process of historical production are particularly instructive:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).⁴⁷

As Trouillot states, "...any historical narrative is a bundle of silence, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly."⁴⁸ In the case of the Icelanders in Canada, one of the most glaring silences in the established historiography of Icelandic migration and myth is the lack of a Canadian context both for the migration story, and the story of those who have told it.

In this study, the operation will involve the deconstruction of four key myths about Icelandic migration and settlement by placing them within various broader historical contexts, followed by an explication of the purposes those myths have served. Chapter one re-examines the question of why the Icelanders left their island home in light

⁴⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 13

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

of the Icelandic context for emigration developed by Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and others. Chapter two looks at the reasons people of Icelandic descent have cited for why migration was directed to Canada, and offers a different perspective based on the greater integration of Iceland into the Atlantic economy during the nineteenth century. Chapter three attempts to shed new light on the Icelandic settlements in Ontario based on a larger understanding of the provincial immigration policies that helped create them. The exodus from Ontario in 1875 was the necessary precondition for the establishment of New Iceland in the Canadian Northwest. Chapter four contrasts the Canadian government's conception of that colony as the product of an efficient land settlement policy with the mythic version positing the colony as a manifestation of Icelandic cultural nationalism in the new world. The final chapter examines the historiographical development of the myths, and the specific circumstances that gave them their significance. Emphasis is placed on how successive generations of historians differently imagined their groups' past in order to forge positive ethnic identities.

It is hoped that this study will stimulate further re-evaluations of the Icelandic-Canadian past. It appears that interest in the field is growing, at least in Iceland, and studies conceived along similar lines have already appeared.⁴⁹ However, there remains ample opportunity to challenge old interpretations from new perspectives.

⁴⁹ Helga Ögmundardóttir, "Ímynd, sjalsmynd, og vald thess sem skilgreinir: af indíánum og Íslendingum í Vesturheimi 1875-1930" [Image, Self-Image and the Power of Those Who Define: Native and Icelandic Relations in North America, 1875-1930] (MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2001).

CHAPTER 1

LEAVING ICELAND

Let me tell you the story as it is told to the children of the community. The Icelanders left their homes because erupting volcanoes drove them into the icy sea. They travelled for months in terrible hardships across the ocean.¹

People of Icelandic descent have often cited cataclysmic volcanic eruptions and other natural disasters as the main causal factors stimulating Icelandic migration to Canada at the end of the nineteenth century.² Helgi Skúli Kjartansson's insights, drawn from international scholarship on migration, differ substantially from how Icelandic migration has traditionally been written about in North America. He has argued that the emigration period in Iceland can be conceptualized in the same way as other large European migrations. The same interplay of push and pull factors, mediated by intervening obstacles in the migration process, determined the course of Icelandic emigration to North America.³ The mythic image of Icelandic migration, too, is comparable to other major migrations in the North Atlantic world. The idea of poor Icelanders struggling to escape showers of ash and rivers of molten lava inspires pathos as much as the well-known stories of the Highland Clearances in Scotland, or the Irish potato famine.

These mythic explanations of why Scottish and Irish migrants left their homes have been found to be overly simplistic, and the Icelandic case is similar. The eruption of

¹ David Arnason, "The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings," in David Arnason and Vincent Arnason, eds., *The New Icelanders: A North American Community* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), 4.

² For example, see Arnason, 4. This interpretation has also been adopted by Canadian historians. See W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 162; Norman Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 208; Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-1997* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), 54.

³ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration," in P.C. Emmer and M. Mörner, eds., *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe* (New York: Berg, 1992), 108.

Mount Askja in January 1875 that led to a regional outpouring of 1190 people in the summer of 1876, most of them bound for the fledgling New Iceland colony in the Canadian North-west, must be seen as an important event in Icelandic migration history. However, the migrations that established Canada as a destination for Icelandic emigrants occurred in the period 1872-75, prior to the eruption; the mass migration of 1876 must be seen as solidifying an already established migration tradition. A survey of the background to Icelandic migration is needed in order to launch an interrogation of how the pattern of migration to Canada developed.

Kjartansson's application of insights drawn from international scholarship on migration is particularly instructive in this task. The onset of the emigration period was not caused by a sudden cataclysm but by economic and demographic pressures on the Icelandic population after 1850. These difficulties, caused primarily by climatic fluctuations and overpopulation, created a crisis in rural society. And yet worse conditions had existed a century before without giving rise to emigration. The crucial difference in the early 1870s was that two of the key obstacles to emigration—insufficient quantity and quality of information on potential destinations and lack of available transport—had been removed, creating an outlet for the excess rural population through mass migration.⁴

Kjartansson's work has done much to explain the context of Icelandic migration, but does not account for the psychological power of the mythic stories. Among people of Icelandic descent, as with other migrant groups, the question of why their ancestors left home is not politically or emotionally neutral. The ideas of being 'pushed' or 'pulled' are

⁴ Kjartansson, "The Onset of Emigration from Iceland," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 9, 1-2 (1977), 87-88.

not just mechanistic forces—they are pregnant with meaning for how migrants and their descendants define their relationships with their ancestral and adopted homelands. While Icelandic-Canadians have historically sought to strike a balance between ‘push’ and ‘pull’ forces in explaining their group’s migration, the emphasis has changed as loyalties have shifted. Early in the twentieth century, accounts of emigration were shaped by the negative reaction mass migration stimulated among Icelandic nationalists. The leaders of Iceland’s drawn-out struggle for independence from Denmark accused emigrants of being disloyal and unpatriotic by abandoning their homeland at precisely the time when it needed them the most. Migrant writers such as Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson defended the actions of the emigrants by arguing that disasters and misfortune had left them little choice. Later in the century, Icelandic-Canadian historians such as Wilhelm Kristjanson and W.J. Lindal downplayed the role of economic and climactic factors, instead emphasizing an ‘uncontrollable impulse’ in the Icelandic character that compelled them to try their luck overseas in much the same way as their Viking ancestors had 1000 years earlier.

If Icelanders can be said to have such an impulse, it must have been dormant for much of the nineteenth century. Icelanders did not take part in the large population movement from Western Europe to North America that proceeded in periods of peaks and troughs between 1815 and 1855. The first tentative stages of the Icelandic migration movement occurred during the 1850s, at precisely the time when continental emigration was on the wane.⁵ Part of the explanation for this apparent contradiction to the general

⁵ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 234.

European trend is that the period from the 1810s to the 1850s was, on the whole, a time of economic and demographic recovery in Iceland after a century of misery.⁶

The eighteenth century in Iceland was a period of successive calamities brought about by environmental disaster and disease. The first episode in this wave of misfortune came when an epidemic of smallpox raged through the country in 1707. This outbreak is estimated to have killed approximately twenty-six percent of the country's population, and was particularly lethal for people under the age of forty. Next came a wave of famine at mid-century. This was caused by unusually cold weather beginning about 1750 that adversely affected Icelandic food production in two important ways. In the first place, pack ice blocked the harbours, closing many fishing grounds and ports. Still more damaging was the limited window that the colder weather left for the growth of the meadows and hay crops that sustained cattle, sheep, and horses. This situation was exacerbated by the cataclysmic 'Skaftá' volcanic eruption of 1783. Another famine followed in the wake of this devastation, lasting until the summer of 1785.⁷ Danish colonial authorities observing the desperate plight of their northern dependency considered the possibility of relocating the entire population to either the neighbouring Danish territory of Greenland or the continental Danish province of Jutland.⁸ These radical proposals ultimately came to nothing.

It seems logical that the hard-pressed Icelanders would have been likely candidates for a voluntary mass migration during or after the dire years of the eighteenth century. However, no such movement arose until the 1870s when conditions were not

⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁷ Ibid., 177-78, 180.

⁸ Nelson S. Gerrard, *The Icelandic Heritage* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications & Research, 1986),

nearly as desperate. What then made the difference between the two periods?

Scholarship on international migration has shown that even the most distressing economic and social conditions in the sending society are often not enough to stimulate mass overseas migration. 'Push' factors such as disease, famine, and environmental disaster have to be accompanied by the presence of a number of facilitating factors that aid in the migration process. The absence of these facilitating factors can render migration either impracticable or unattractive.⁹

In examining Scottish migration from 1815 to 1855, James M. Cameron has identified seven obstacles to international migration: distance, cost, availability of transportation, political barriers, organization, personal inertia, and quantity and quality of information.¹⁰ He argues that there are a number of formal and informal agencies that assist emigrants in overcoming these obstacles, some of which include shipping companies and emigrant agents, emigration societies and unions, publishers of books, newspapers, and periodicals, and friends who had already emigrated.¹¹ All of these obstacles and facilitating factors in the migration process are relevant in understanding the beginning of the Icelandic emigration movement in the 1870s. In Iceland, the removal of the obstacles to migration occurred in the period 1850-72, much later than in countries such as Scotland and Norway. The significance of the time lag between Iceland and its North Atlantic neighbours was later to have profound significance in determining the process and direction of Icelandic migration. However, the presence of obstacles to

⁹ See Peter N. Moogk, "Reluctant Exiles: Emigrants from France in Canada Before 1760," in Gerald Tulchinsky, ed., *Immigration to Canada: Historical Perspectives* (Toronto: Copp Clark Longman Ltd., 1994), 31.

¹⁰ James M. Cameron, "The Role of Shipping from Scottish Ports in Emigration to the Canadas, 1815 to 1855," in D.H. Akenson, ed., *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, 2 (1980), 135.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

international migration in the first half of the nineteenth century is only part of the reason why the Icelanders did not join the post-Napoleonic wave of European migration to North America.

During the first half of the nineteenth century there was a gradual regeneration of both the island's economy and its population that offset the negative effects of the post-war economic depression in continental Europe. This period of relative prosperity was not sparked by any significant technological innovations or modernization; it was based on increased agricultural and fishing production using traditional methods. The climate grew warmer again, which helped increase agricultural production. The number of sheep in the country more than doubled between 1810 and 1854 from 230,000 to over 500,000.¹² Evidence strongly suggests that expanded production in this period was increasingly geared toward the export market. Much of the new sheep population was in wethers¹³ whose wool, meat, and tallow were key export commodities. Even more significant was the growth in Icelandic fish exports from 18,000 metric tonnes in 1806 to 35,782 by 1855. This economic expansion was fuelled by an increase in the Icelandic population that directed people further inland to take up marginal land, and onto the coast to conduct fishing from small villages.¹⁴ Iceland's population was only 47, 230 in 1801, but by 1860 it had reached 66, 987.¹⁵

The period of prosperity in Iceland during the first half of the nineteenth century coincided with the development of an Icelandic national consciousness vocalized by the

¹² Karlsson, 224

¹³ Ibid. Wether: a castrated ram. The milk of female ewes was primarily used for home consumption.

¹⁴ Ibid., 224-25, 227.

¹⁵ Guðmundur Jónsson and Magnús S. Magnússon, eds., *Hagskinna: Sölegar Hagtölur um Ísland-Icelandic Historical Statistics* (Reykjavík: Hagstofa Íslands, 1997), 49

country's intelligentsia. In the early nineteenth century there was a heightened interest in the unique language and culture of Iceland. The European Romantic movement, with its emphasis on recovering the Germanic roots of European culture, inspired Scandinavian scholars to look to Iceland, erroneously, as an example of Viking Age civilization in stasis. Danish intellectuals mistakenly came to imagine the Icelandic language as the Norse tongue once common to all of Scandinavia. The Dane Rasmus Christian Rask worked to promote the preservation of the language, which he worried was threatened by heavy Danish influence at Reykjavík and places around the country where the Icelanders mixed with Danes involved in trade.¹⁶

The Romantic interest in Icelandic language and culture infused Icelandic students in Copenhagen with a new spirit of national confidence that they mobilized in the political arena. Emboldened by the 1830 European revolutions, the Icelanders began to agitate for the reestablishment of the ancient Icelandic *Alþing* (parliament) as a step toward gaining a greater degree of autonomy from Denmark.¹⁷ Iceland had been ruled by foreign powers since 1262, when Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarsson seized an opportunity created by bloody internal feuding among Icelandic leaders to persuade the *Alþing* to submit to the authority of the Norwegian Crown. Dynastic intermarriage between Scandinavian royal families led to the Kalmar Union of 1397, in which Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were united under the rule of King Erik of Pomerania. Eventually, Denmark came to dominate the union, and Iceland became a dependency of the Danish Crown.¹⁸ The *Alþing* was retained in a consultative capacity until 1800,

¹⁶ Karlsson, 200.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 200, 203-04.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

although its effective power had been eroded for many years prior to its final disappearance.

The Icelandic intellectuals of the early nineteenth century sought to recover the glories of the 'Old Commonwealth Period' (c.930-1262) when Iceland was an independent polity. They publicized their political campaign for the reestablishment of the Alþing in the annual *Fjölur*, which was read widely in Iceland for its nationalistic poetry. By 1837-38, the majority of top officials and farmers in Iceland had added their voices to the calls for a resurrected Alþing and greater autonomy. In 1841, the liberal scholar Jón Sigurðsson became politically active and quickly made a lasting impression through articles in his journal *Ný félagsrit* (New Society Papers). Sigurðsson was not a romantic in the same sense as the group who published *Fjölur*. He worked in service of the same cause, but was a committed liberal who saw Iceland's future not in recreating some past golden age, but through the development of expanded democracy, modernization, and economic progress.¹⁹

The struggle for greater autonomy was ultimately superseded by a struggle for national independence. This occurred, however, only gradually through a series of steps that took a century to complete. The Alþing was re-established as a consultative body in 1843, and a Constituent Assembly was created in 1848. In 1874 King Christian IX granted Iceland a constitution giving the Alþing exclusive legislative powers over internal matters. In 1918, Iceland became a fully autonomous state in a personal union with the Danish king, and in 1944 all ties with Denmark were severed when the fully independent Republic of Iceland came into being.

¹⁹ Ibid., 208.

Just as the first steps in this long drawn-out struggle were being taken cracks were appearing in the country's newfound economic stability. As the recovery and expansion of the economy was largely built on the old production methods, especially in the agricultural sector, it was subject to the same fluctuations in climatic conditions that had so adversely affected Iceland in the previous century. For the majority of the Icelandic population, the prosperity was precarious and ultimately proved to be short-lived.

During the 1850s and 1860s, environmental, economic, and demographic pressures on the Icelandic population created a crisis in Icelandic rural society that set the stage for the emigration period. Two factors adversely affecting the rearing of sheep helped cause a contraction in the Icelandic economy after mid-century. The first was an epizootic of scabies brought to the island in 1855 by imported British stock. The disease resulted in a 40 percent reduction in the sheep population of Iceland between 1854 and 1859.²⁰ This overall figure masks more severe local reductions of up to 78 and 85 percent in the southwestern counties of Rangárvallasýsla and Gullbringusýsla.²¹ The second factor damaging the pastoral economy was the gradual cooling of climate from about 1859 that exacerbated the difficulties brought about by disease. Between 1858 and 1859, the average mean temperature recorded at Stykkishólmur in West Iceland dropped from 3.33° C to 0.94°.²² A drop such as this in a warmer climate might seem insignificant, but for Iceland it had dire consequences. Longer and colder winters meant a shorter growing season for the grass and hay crops vital to the maintenance of the livestock.²³ The life cycle of sheep was also subject to fluctuations in climate. The

²⁰ Ibid., 277.

²¹ Jónsson and Magnússon, 230.

²² Similar drops occurred in 1866, 1869, and 1874. Ibid., 37.

²³ Karlsson, 230.

health of lambs born in May could be threatened if colder temperatures persisted too far into the spring.²⁴

The difficulties in pastoral agriculture reduced economic opportunities for the younger generation of Icelanders who were an increasingly significant portion of the population by 1850. Due to the population boom during the early part of the century, the period 1850-1860 saw the twenty-five to thirty-four age group grow by 45 percent, while the population as a whole grew by only 13 percent.²⁵ This bulge in the population put stress on the traditional pattern of rural life that had persisted for centuries.

During the nineteenth century, Iceland was overwhelmingly rural and life moved according to patterns that were deeply entrenched both economically and socially. From the earliest settlement of Iceland, most of the population had been divided into two sections—farmers and those who served them. Fishing was only a secondary occupation, conducted in seasons when there was a break from agricultural labour. According to law, everyone, with a few exceptions, was expected to be resident on a farm in one of these two capacities.²⁶ The farm population commonly consisted of ten to fifteen individuals, each of whom contributed to its operation in some way.²⁷ In addition to the farmer, his wife, and their family, both immediate and extended, were the domestic servants²⁸ who were required by law to reside on the farm for at least a year at a time. In the traditional pattern of rural life, women and men spent some time in domestic service on established farms prior to marrying and setting up their own households. Establishing a farm of

²⁴ Gerrard, 53.

²⁵ Karlsson, 230.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁷ Gerrard, 55.

²⁸ The term 'domestic servant' in Iceland encompasses both women and men engaged in all types of farm labour.

one's own had always been a limited prospect for people from poorer families, but the increased population meant that the possibility was reduced even for those of higher economic standing. In response to this development the size of traditional households expanded, but even the capacity of large farms to absorb the excess numbers into their working populations was eventually exceeded.²⁹

The failure of the old pattern of rural life to meet the challenges of a larger population resulted in a number of different responses from young Icelanders. Many moved into the fishing industry, the sector of the economy that was then experiencing substantial growth. During the course of the nineteenth century, fishing was developed as a large-scale enterprise—the first in the country's history. Small rowboats were replaced with larger decked fishing vessels that employed hundreds of workers. Increased trade in marine products with continental Europe afforded greater opportunities for men to work at harvesting the ocean as their primary occupation.³⁰ These men and their families resided in small fishing villages that dotted the coast. This proto-urbanization was an important outlet for the excess rural population. At least 14,000 Icelanders became residents of coastal villages during the period 1870-1914.³¹ Another survival strategy employed by poor Icelanders was to become migratory labourers who moved around in response to seasonal demands in the labour market. Known as *lausamenn* (literally 'loose men') or *kaupamenn* (waged men), these workers pursued a sketchy existence working in the hay fields during the summer and in the fishing industry during the winter.³²

²⁹ Karlsson, 230

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 241.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

³² Gerrard, 56.

Many in the upper strata of Icelandic society considered these two survival strategies of the poor to be detrimental to the established economic and social order of the country. Officially these modes of life were forbidden, but enforcement was problematic.³³ This policy was based on the economic and social conservatism of an Icelandic political elite attempting to prop up the crumbling traditional order.³⁴ On a very practical level, there was concern that the non-farming population would stretch Iceland's poor relief mechanism to the breaking point. Migratory labourers and fisherfolk were often subject to economic misfortune when fishing failed, labour was not in demand, or if sickness or injury hampered their ability to work and provide for their families. In such instances, they became wards of the district of their birth and were distributed among farmers who kept them at the cost of the district.³⁵ The concerns of legislators were based on obvious trends in Icelandic society; the number of paupers maintained by the districts increased from 1,827 in 1860 to 3,901 in 1870.³⁶ Many of the members of the Alþing were farmers themselves who would have to pay for the upkeep of paupers.

Members of the Alþing also reacted to the crisis of overpopulation by attempting to limit its recurrence in the future. Regulations restricting the marriage of those on poor relief unless given special permission were in effect in Denmark and Iceland prior to the crisis. However, during the 1850s and 1860s the Alþing repeatedly tried to expand these restrictions to place more authority over granting or denying the right to marry in the hands of communal authorities who paid the poor relief.³⁷ Subjective categories of

³³ Karlsson, 231.

³⁴ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "Social Distinctions and National Unity: On politics of nationalism in nineteenth century Iceland," *History of European Ideas*, 21, 6 (1995), 769.

³⁵ Gerrard, 56.

³⁶ Jónsson and Magnússon, 211. Paupers were people of both sexes and all ages. Pauper families were often split-up and placed on different farms. See Gerrard, 56.

³⁷ Karlsson, 231.

people to be targeted such as “notorious squanderers, drunkards and good-for-nothings”³⁸ may have contributed to the rejection of this legislation by the Danish King.

Icelandic conservatives also opposed the practices of living in fishing villages or as migratory labour because it was believed that living on a farm was a social and educational necessity for young Icelanders.³⁹ They worried that exposure to Danish influences at fishing villages and ports was detrimental to the moral health of young Icelanders.⁴⁰ Ultimately, social legislation did not succeed in curbing the growth of fishing villages as an outlet for the excess rural population.

Historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson has argued that the conservatism demonstrated by the Alþing’s attempts at social control points to an essential paradox within the Icelandic nationalist movement during the nineteenth century. The development of Icelandic nationalism is commonly traced through the writings of a group of intellectuals, such as the national hero Jón Sigurðsson, committed to the liberal ideals of personal and economic liberty. However, Hálfðanarson argues that the Icelandic nationalist movement also encompassed conservatives whose interest in nationalism stemmed from a desire to preserve the existing Icelandic culture and economy from the influence of continental liberalism. This conservative Icelandic elite had little interest in personal freedom.⁴¹

Icelandic and Icelandic-Canadian writers have often cited dissatisfaction with Danish colonial rule as a minor factor contributing to emigration. In his 1929 MA thesis Angantyr Arnason wrote that while the majority of Icelanders emigrated for economic

³⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*

³⁹ Hálfðanarson, 770.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 774.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 767.

reasons, the slowness with which political reform came about may have compelled some impatient people to leave the country.⁴² According to Kjartansson, “An account of Icelandic emigration customarily includes a reference to political frustration as an important background factor. This explanation has something to it, but has been seriously overemphasized by contemporaries as well as later writers, partly as an apologetic attempt to put emigration in a patriotic light.”⁴³ It is tempting to argue that the social and economic conservatism of the upper echelons of Icelandic society, rather than the actions of the more liberal Danes, helped to provide a political climate in which emigration was a favourable option for the domestic servant class. Such a hypothesis is difficult to prove, but it is clear that social restrictions impeded young Icelanders from moving into the fishing economy and possibly bettering their circumstances.⁴⁴

At the very least the political situation did little to alleviate the crisis in rural Icelandic society that took hold during the 1850s. Kjartansson believes that it was demographic pressure on a young population faced with limited economic opportunity that was the primary push factor stimulating Icelandic emigration.⁴⁵ This situation was the result of longer-term downward trends in the economy brought on by a colder climate, rather than by any sudden crisis.⁴⁶ However, Kjartansson believes that emigration could not begin on a mass scale until obstacles such as lack of transport and information about overseas destinations were removed in the early 1870s.⁴⁷ The sudden

⁴² Angantyr Arnason, “Icelandic Settlements in America” (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1929), 2.

⁴³ Kjartansson, “Emigrant Fares and Emigration from Iceland to North America, 1874-1893,” *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 28, 1 (1980), 71.

⁴⁴ Gerrard, 56.

⁴⁵ Kjartansson, “The Onset,” 87.

⁴⁶ It has been suggested that a powerful earthquake around the port of Husavík in 1872 may have had a hand in stimulating emigration from the Þingeyjarsýsla region in 1873. See Gerrard, 88.

⁴⁷ Kjartansson, “Icelandic Emigration,” 109.

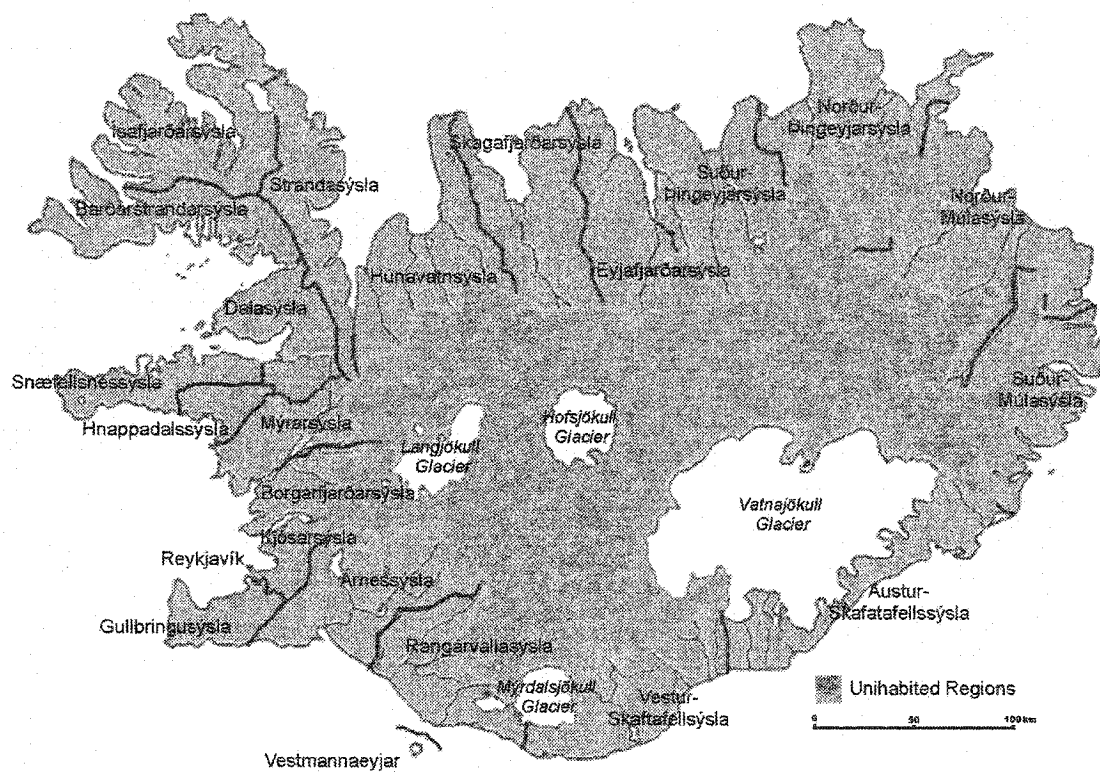


Fig. 1. *sýslur* divisions in Iceland during the emigration period.

Source: Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 153.

emigration surge in 1873 hides how these obstacles were slowly being addressed between 1850 and 1870 when the first few small bands of emigrants set out from their northern homeland.

One of the major obstacles was lack of information about overseas destinations. Books and periodicals became more abundant in Iceland after 1850 through the establishment of printing presses outside of Reykjavík. This was especially important in north-central and northeastern parts of the country where interest in emigration began in 1859-60. The first print shop in the principal northern town of Akureyri was established in 1852, and the newspaper *Norðanfari* began publication from Akureyri in 1864. Icelanders resident in Denmark or Great Britain frequently wrote to *Norðanfari* with news from continental Europe and North America.⁴⁸ That the activities of the Akureyri shop were closely followed by at least some Icelanders is attested to by the diary of Jón Jónsson, a farmer at Mjóðalur in the district of Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla who later emigrated in 1873. In 1856, Jón recorded the number of books and periodicals published by the Akureyri shop, as well as the names of sixteen he had read during the long dark winter months.⁴⁹ Jon was also an active member of the *Lestrarfélag* (reading society) in the Bárðardal valley, which had thirty members in 1854.⁵⁰

While not all Icelanders were members of reading societies, most were at least able to read. Public education in the modern sense was virtually non-existent, yet there was a high rate of literacy among the general population. This was due to the traditional practice of education in the home, conducted by older members of the household,

⁴⁸ For example, see *Norðanfari*, 28 August 1868. This issue contains a news item on the Fenian raids in Canada written by Þórlakur Ó. Johnsen, an Icelandic resident in London, England.

⁴⁹ National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Jon Jónsson Fonds, R7835-0-4-E, p. v., preface [to the Diary of Jon Jónsson].

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, iv.

sometimes supplemented by the visits of itinerant teachers who taught school to children of a particular district for several weeks at a time.⁵¹ The increased flow of information and ideas, especially from metropolitan Copenhagen, helped initiate the first overseas migrations. These were small-scale and highly localized movements to Utah and Brazil in the 1850s and 1860s.

The first migrant group was composed of religious converts to the Mormon faith who followed their co-religionists to Utah. Mormonism had first appeared in Iceland in the 1850s when two young men converted in Copenhagen returned to their homes in Vestmannaeyjar (the Westmann Islands) off the southern coast of Iceland. The pair succeeded in converting a few of their fellow islanders, thirteen of whom headed for Utah between 1855 and 1857. All but two of the initial Utah migrants were adults between the ages of 28 and 43.⁵² There were eight married couples, two single men, three single women, and no children.⁵³ The first Icelandic Mormon emigration ceased by 1860, but was later resumed and continued as a small and distinct current during the later Icelandic emigration period. It did not, however, extend far beyond the geographical scope of Vestmannaeyjar, the small cluster of islands off the southern coast. In 1874, ten people from Vestmannaeyjar left for Utah guided by Samuel Bjarnason and Loftur Jónsson, two men who had initially gone out during the 1850s.⁵⁴

Just as the first Mormon emigration was ending, a group of people in the northern district of Þingeyjarsýsla were discussing a possible move to the abandoned Viking

⁵¹ Karlsson, 255.

⁵² Information drawn from genealogical records on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, *Family Search*, database on-line (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2003, accessed Jan. 11, 2003); available on <http://www.familysearch.org>.

⁵³ E.H. Johnson, "Saga Íslendinga í Utah," *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* (1915), 41-44.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 46; Jóníus H. Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of the Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983), xx.

colonies in Greenland, an area they were familiar with from their reading of the medieval Icelandic sagas.⁵⁵ The disastrously cold winter of 1859-60 struck Þingeyjarsýsla particularly hard, and gave new impetus to talk of emigration. The multilingual farmer Einar Ásmundsson took leadership of the Þingeyjarsýsla emigration society and steered it away from its designs on a revived Icelandic colony in frosty Greenland. He could not see the logic in leaving one cold, inhospitable climate for one that was still more severe. Instead, Ásmundsson advocated Brazil, a country he had learned about during a year spent in Copenhagen.⁵⁶ He authored a circular that compared the virtues of Canada, the United States, and Brazil as fields for migration and settlement, concluding enthusiastically in favour of the most southerly location:

...Brazil on the whole is a better country than the United States; indeed it is in all things considered, one of the very best countries in the world. Winter never comes there, and many kinds of fruits and vegetables grow excellently.⁵⁷

Young Kristján Guðmundsson left for Brazil in 1861, but had to work in Copenhagen for two years to earn funds for the second leg of the trip. In 1863, a few months after Kristján had finally arrived in Rio, a group of four young men went to Brazil to report on conditions there for their friends back home. Their accounts of conditions and prospects in Brazil were published frequently in the pages of *Norðanfari*.⁵⁸

This first-hand reportage seems to have sparked the interest of many of their countrymen in the north of Iceland. In 1865 over one hundred signed up for a planned emigration to Brazil that never took place due to problems finding a large enough

⁵⁵ The Norse colonies in Greenland, founded c.1000, were mysteriously abandoned during the fifteenth century. It is believed that a deteriorating climate damaged the Norse Greenlanders' ability to carry on pastoral agriculture. See Karlsson, 191.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁷ Trans. and quoted in *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁸ For example, see *Norðanfari*, 15 August 1864, 28 January 1865, 13 March 1866, and 12 July 1871.

transport to carry the group to Copenhagen.⁵⁹ In 1871, the interest of the people of Þingeyjarsýsla was aroused once again when one of the Icelanders in Brazil reported to his countrymen that the Brazilian government was prepared to provide free transportation from continental ports. Possibly as many as 600 people from the north of Iceland signed up to go in 1873, but again there was great difficulty securing a ship with sufficient space to take the emigrants from Iceland to either Copenhagen or Hamburg where they could board a transatlantic steamer for Brazil. In the end, only thirty-five persons migrated from Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla to Brazil in 1873.⁶⁰ This group secured passage on merchant ships headed to Copenhagen from the north of Iceland. Once in Copenhagen, the Brazilian Consul arranged passage for the group from Hamburg to Rio. During their wait in the German port, four of their number succumbed to an epidemic disease then affecting the city. No further emigration to Brazil occurred after the 1873 fiasco, although interest in the project did not disappear immediately. There were still meetings being held on the subject as late as 1876.⁶¹

It is reasonable to assume that many of the hundreds of emigrants from the north of Iceland who signed up to go to Brazil in 1873 eventually changed their destination to North America. Why then, did the group of thirty-five persist in their desire to go to Brazil? The 1873 Brazilian group consisted primarily of farm families, accompanied by some young single labourers and domestics, from the sub-district of Ljósavatnshreppur.⁶² Within this subdistrict, all of the Brazilian emigrants came from farms in the parish of

⁵⁹ Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: The Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000), 60-61.

⁶⁰ Wilhelm Kristjanson, "Icelandic Settlers in Brazil," *The Icelandic-Canadian Magazine* (Summer 1950), 12-13.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Kristinsson, 312-323. Each *sýslur* (district) was divided into a number of *hreppur* (sub-district).

Lundarbrekka, the same parish of origin as the group of four young men who went out in 1863.⁶³ It is entirely possible that there were blood relations linking these people. One family that did not fit this pattern was that of the farmer Guðmundur Guðmundsson who came from Halldórsstaðir in Laxárdal, Helgastaðahreppur.⁶⁴ Guðmundur and his four adult children, however, were travelling to Brazil on the advice of his son Kristján, who was the first Icelander to settle there in 1863.⁶⁵ This evidence indicates that the Brazilian emigration, like that of the Vestmannaajar Mormons, was a migration system linking one geographically specific territory with another.⁶⁶ Whereas religious specificity limited the Mormon movement, the failure of the transportation system to convey larger numbers of people restricted the Brazilian emigration from taking on a more general character.⁶⁷

In general, a dearth of available shipping was one of the key obstacles to mass migration from Iceland.⁶⁸ Unlike British migrants in the early nineteenth century, Icelanders could not secure passage to North America aboard trading vessels or specially designed passenger ships. Its colonial status funnelled Iceland's participation in the Atlantic economy almost exclusively through Denmark—no direct trade links connected

⁶³ Information on the location of farms within parishes drawn from Hálfðan Helgason, "Þingeyjarsýsla south (22) - parishes and farms based on 1880 census," *The Emigration from Iceland to North America*, website (Reykjavík, Iceland: Hálfðan Helgason, 2003, accessed 11 Jan 2003); available on: <http://www.simnet.is/halfdanh/county22.htm>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Farms in Iceland have names; since many of these names are repeated throughout the country, other signifiers are used to explain where precisely the farm is located. For example, the farm *Halldórsstaðir* is located in the *Laxárdal* valley in the sub-district of *Helgastaðahreppur*, in the district of *Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla*.

⁶⁵ Jonas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 15.

⁶⁶ For a succinct definition of the systems approach to migration, see Dirk Hoerder, "From Immigration to Migration Systems: New Concepts in Migration History," *OAH Magazine of History*, 14, 1 (Fall 1999): 5-11.

⁶⁷ Kjartansson, "The Onset," 88.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

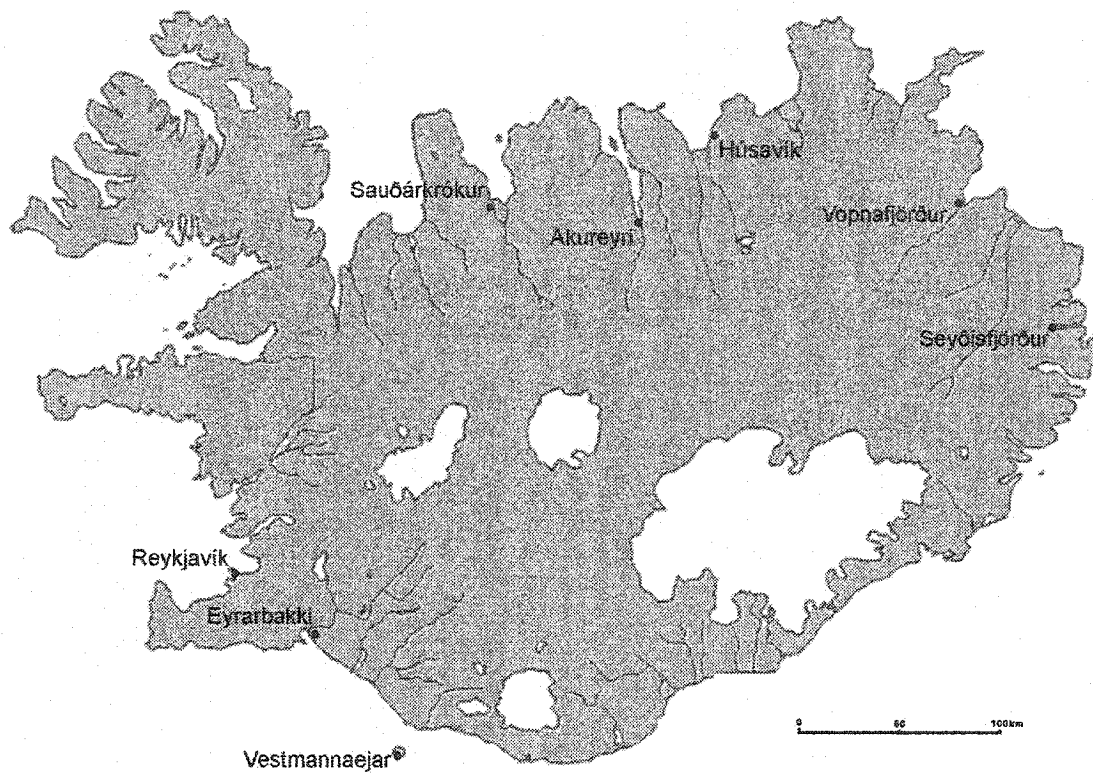


Fig. 2. Main trading ports involved in emigration. Source: Árni Daníel Júlíusson, Jón Ólafur Ísberg, and Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, eds., *Íslenskur Sögu Atlas, 2 bindi Frá 18 öld til fullveldis* [Icelandic Historical Atlas, Vol. 2: from the 18th century to Independence] (Reykjavík: Iðunn, 1992), 135.

Iceland with North or South America.⁶⁹ Migrants had to board packet boats or freighters that would take them to destinations in Britain or Denmark from where they could use the services of steamship agents to join the stream of international migrants filtering through major British ports such as Glasgow and Liverpool.⁷⁰ During the nineteenth century there was a steady increase in the number of ships entering Icelandic ports and harbours.⁷¹ This increased the possibility that smaller groups of individuals could find passage in this way, but the trading vessels were not built to carry large numbers of passengers. Even the small group of thirty-five Brazilian migrants had to find separate transports to Copenhagen.⁷²

These packet boats and freighters from Denmark, Norway, and Great Britain called at Icelandic trading stations along the coast during the summer months. The majority of the ships were either owned or hired by the large Danish firms who ran the trade at various harbours throughout Iceland.⁷³ The freighters were engaged in the transport of miscellaneous goods, and would often carry small numbers of passengers on the return journey. The destination depended on the cargo, and emigrants had to negotiate the successive legs of their journeys from wherever the freighter docked on the continent. Between 1870 and 1872, Copenhagen was the initial destination of most Icelandic migrants bound for North America, but Kristiana (Oslo) and Bergen in Norway were also common destinations. In early June of 1872, the Akureyri newspaper *Norðanfari* reported that the barque *Emma Auvegne*, on its way to Norway to secure a

⁶⁹ Three American ships visited Iceland between 1809-11. No emigrants are known to have left aboard these ships. See Jónsson and Magnússon, Table 11.2, 568

⁷⁰ Kjartansson, "The Onset," 88.

⁷¹ Jónsson and Magnússon, Fig. 35, 916.

⁷² Thor, 16.

⁷³ Karlsson, 243.

load of timber, was also transporting Jóhannes Arngrímsson, Jónas Jónsson, and Jón Halldórsson, three young labourers from Suður-Píngeyjarsýsla, on the first leg of a journey to Milwaukee, Wisconsin.⁷⁴ Because the freighters did not operate on a regular schedule, coordinating a journey on them could be difficult. *Norðanfari* publicized the impending arrival of the *Emma Auvegne* in Akureyri on the 11th of May, only eighteen days before it docked.⁷⁵

Packet boats ran on more regular schedules, and the fares were publicized in the newspapers. Many of the early migrants utilized these mail boats to travel between Iceland and Denmark. The fare from Iceland to Copenhagen aboard the postal ship ranged between 36 and 45 *ríkisdalir* (rd),⁷⁶ depending on the level of service, and passage to Scotland could be secured for between 27 and 35 rd. In 1870, the postal steamer *Diana* was scheduled to make seven trips between Denmark and Iceland between the 1 March and the 20 November. The number of stops on the schedule varied, but on most trips during the summer months the ship called at Seyðisfjörður on the east coast and then at Reykjavík prior to returning to Copenhagen by way of the Faroe and Shetland Islands. On the last trip of the year, which was scheduled to leave Reykjavík on the 20 November, the ship called at either Leith or Granton in Scotland before continuing on to Copenhagen.⁷⁷

Emigration via the packet boat route was both time consuming and expensive. On 12 May 1870, the first group of Icelanders to migrate to Wisconsin steamed out of Reykjavík aboard the *Diana*. The four young men arrived in Copenhagen at the end of

⁷⁴ *Norðanfari*, 3 June 1872.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1872.

⁷⁶ No exchange rate data is available before 1914. However, in 1872 the editor of *Norðanfari* suggested that 1 US Dollar was equal to 1 ríkisdalir, 5 marks, and 6 6/7 skillings. See *Ibid.*, 14 March 1872.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 December 1869.

May; there they boarded the steamer *Pacific* which transported them across the North Sea to Hull, in England. In Hull the party boarded a train bound for the transatlantic hub of Liverpool. They left Liverpool aboard the Allan Line steamer *Austrian* bound for Quebec, arriving in Canada on 19 June. They continued by rail to Milwaukee, arriving on 27 June 1870.⁷⁸ One of the party, Árni Guðmundsson, later recalled that the journey from Copenhagen to Milwaukee had cost each man 94 rd.⁷⁹ Including the trip on the postal steamer from Reykjavík to Copenhagen, the whole journey had cost the men at least 130 rd.⁸⁰ During this period the annual wage of a male agricultural labourer was 27 rd, and that of a female domestic servant was 12 rd.⁸¹

While the beginning of the emigration era in Iceland is usually dated from 1870, the migrations of 1870-72 had more in common with the 1861-63 Brazil emigrations than with the mass movements of 1873-74 that helped solidify patterns of migration to Canada and the United States. Most of the 1870-72 Wisconsin migrants were part of a migration chain based on business and kinship connections linking the southwestern Icelandic trading station of Eyrarbakki with Scandinavian settlements in Wisconsin. The emigrants were mostly young single people, the sons and daughters of merchants and relatively prosperous farmers who had at least some capital to take with them to the United States.⁸² Once again, it was broader connections with the Scandinavian world that helped touch off this migration.

⁷⁸ Árni Guðmundsen, "Landnám Íslendinga á Washington-ejinni," *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* (1900), 28-30.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁰ See Gerrard, 56.

⁸¹ Jónsson and Magnússon, Table 12.2.

⁸² Thor, 16.

Up until 1870, Iceland had been completely left out of the broader current of Scandinavian migration to the U.S. Midwest. In the period 1836-1865, approximately 78,000 Norwegians migrated to the United States.⁸³ Swedes and Danes were slower to begin migrating, but traditions of Danish and Swedish migration to the United States only began in the 1860s.⁸⁴ When the first Icelanders left for Wisconsin in May of 1870, they joined the routes commonly travelled by other Scandinavian migrants, involving a journey from ports such as Copenhagen and Bergen across the North Sea to the port of Hull, and then an overland trip to the transatlantic terminus of Liverpool.⁸⁵ They passed through the same network of steamship and company agents who were recruiting Scandinavian labour for the U.S. Midwest. Many of the early migrants possessed a knowledge of Norwegian or Danish that helped them converse with their fellow emigrants, and learn about American destinations.

Most of the migrants had already decided their destination based on information gained from contacts in Iceland. The trade connections linking Iceland to Denmark and Norway were significant not only for the route but also for helping to determine migrants' destinations. Fears of nationalist leaders that heavy foreign influence in the towns and trading stations was eroding Icelandic nationality seem to have been at least partly justified. Danish and Norwegian traders intermarried with Icelandic women and had families that were bilingual. Because of their connection, sometimes by blood, with Danes and Norwegians, the early migrants adapted readily to the mixed Scandinavian

⁸³ Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825-1860* (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1931), 20-21.

⁸⁴ Ingrid Semmingsen, "Origin of Nordic Emigration," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 9 (1977), 10.

⁸⁵ Berit Brattne and Sune Åkerman, "The Importance of the Transport Sector for Mass Emigration," in Harald Runbolm and Hans Norman, eds., *From Sweden to America: A History of the Migration*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 179.

communities of the Midwestern United States. Of particular importance was the trading station at Eyrarbakki in southwestern Iceland. Many of these 1870-72 migrants either worked at stores in Eyrarbakki or Reykjavík as merchants, storekeepers, and assistants or were from adjacent farming communities.⁸⁶

In 1865, a Dane named William Wickmann, who had lived and worked at Eyrarbakki for ten years, migrated to the United States, eventually settling in Wisconsin. He wrote back to his former employer, merchant Guðmundur Thorgrimsen at the Lefolli store at Eyrarbakki, reporting on the prospects of settlement in the Midwestern United States. These letters were circulated among his friends and former co-workers at the store, and are often cited as the impetus behind the first migrations from southwest Iceland to Wisconsin.⁸⁷ In 1870, four single men, Jón Gíslason, Guðmundur Guðmundsson, Árni Guðmundsson, and Jón Einarsson, migrated to Wisconsin; though Einarsson was from Reykjavík, the rest had connections to Eyrarbakki.⁸⁸ The following year merchant Einar Bjarnason from Reykjavík and his two adolescent children followed the four men to Wisconsin. A Danish storekeeper named H.P.J. Kreyser and his family also left Iceland for North America in 1871.⁸⁹ In 1872, fourteen people with Eyrarbakki connections emigrated to Wisconsin.⁹⁰

The merchant Guðmundur Thorgrimsen became a strong proponent of emigration, corresponding on the subject with his brother-in-law Þórlakur Gunnar Jónsson of Stórutjarnir in Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla. Þórlakur's wife Henrietta and Guðmundur's wife

⁸⁶ This insight is drawn from the occupations of the migrants 1870-71 migrants. See Kristinsson, 101, 113-114, 125.

⁸⁷ Gudmundsen, 28.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 30-35.

⁸⁹ Kristinsson, 114, 125.

⁹⁰ Gudmundsen, 38.

Solveig were the daughters of a Norwegian merchant. Þórlakur and Henrietta's sons Haraldur and Páll, along with Haraldur's wife María and a young man named Árni Sveinbjörnsson, made the arduous overland journey from Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla to Eyrarbakki to join the party headed for Wisconsin in 1872.⁹¹

The Icelanders in Wisconsin clustered together in Milwaukee and in the rural settlement of Washington Island, but they were not isolated from other Scandinavians. A 22 August 1872 letter from migrant Árni Guðmundsson to his parents about life on Washington Island is particularly revealing:

Wickmann and Jón Gíslason offered us a warm welcome, and we're still here. Since arriving six days ago, we have done little, although I've already obtained employment with a Danish farmer on the next farm, a man by the name of Koyen, from Jutland. I eat lunch with him, but take breakfast and supper at Wickmann's.⁹²

Guðmundsson's letter home is just one example of the extensive correspondence that the early Wisconsin settlers carried out with their friends and relatives in Iceland. The migrants' accounts of life in the Midwestern states were circulated informally in their home districts, and reached a wider Icelandic audience through publication. A Norwegian emigrant letter was published under the heading *Brjef frá Ameríku* (Letter from America) in 1871, and emigrant letters regularly appeared in the pages of *Norðanfari* which was read widely throughout the north.⁹³ This meant that for the first time Icelanders were receiving a steady stream of information about conditions in North America. The fact that these were first hand accounts from Icelanders is by no means

⁹¹ W.J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Ottawa: National Printers, 1967), 89.

⁹² Translated and quoted in Arngrímsson, 64.

⁹³ Ólafur F. Hjartar, *Vesturheimsprent: skrá um rit á íslensku prentuð vestan hafis og austan af Vestur-Íslendingum eða varðandi þá-A Bibliography of Publications in Icelandic Printed in North America or Elsewhere by or Relating to the Icelandic Settlers in the West* (Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands, 1986), 75; Arngrímsson, 66.

inconsequential; migration historians have emphasized how personal correspondence from earlier migrants is often a key source potential migrants use when deciding on a destination.⁹⁴ The faith that potential migrants are said to have placed in the reliability of accounts from countrymen settled overseas is often juxtaposed to the sceptical attitudes they displayed towards recruiting brochures produced by transport companies or governments.⁹⁵ Such materials were virtually non-existent in Iceland until late in 1872 when Reykjavík merchant Guðmundur Lambertsen became an agent of the Allan Steamship Line, and were not available in the Icelandic language until the Canadian government issued its first Icelandic language pamphlet in 1875.⁹⁶

The year 1873 marks the beginning of the mass movement that brought 20 to 25 percent of the Icelandic population to North America in the period up to 1905.⁹⁷ The number of emigrants increased from a mere 24 in 1872 to at least 289 in 1873.⁹⁸ For the first time, a significant number of families were included among the migrants. That almost all these people were initially destined for the Wisconsin destinations of Milwaukee and Washington Island attests to the influence of correspondence from the earlier migrants.⁹⁹ How a significant number of these people came to be settled in Canada is the subject of the chapters that follow.

An examination of the contexts of the beginning of mass migration from Iceland reveals that the explosion in the volume of emigration in 1873 was not precipitated by any sudden cataclysm, volcanic or otherwise. After 1850, the traditional pattern of rural

⁹⁴ Hoerder, 6.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ The pamphlet *Nýja Ísland í Kanada* was published by the Canadian government in 1875. See Gerrard, 89.

⁹⁷ Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration," 105.

⁹⁸ Kristinsson, xx.

⁹⁹ Gerrard, 89.

life in Iceland was placed under severe stress by climatic deterioration and a large population of young people. The reduction in economic opportunities for the young population led them to seek possible outlets to earn a livelihood. Some entered the expanding fishing economy, but for many entry into this possible outlet was impeded by restrictive social policies. Emigration was the other possible outlet for the excess rural population.

The pressure on the Icelandic population, however, was not enough to stimulate emigration. Push and pull factors were insufficient; a number of mediating factors needed also to be in place. A paucity of information about overseas destinations, and lack of shipping designed for the transport of large numbers of migrants, impeded the beginning of migration on a mass scale. These obstacles were beginning to be addressed after 1850 when an increased flow of information about overseas destinations, facilitated by the greater proliferation of newspapers and print shops, provided Icelanders with a steady source of information. The lack of shipping was more problematic, but the first hand correspondence and reports of the small numbers of young male migrants who ventured out aboard trading ships on the first leg of journeys to Brazil and later Wisconsin had the effect of stimulating the emigration of their countrymen. The small clustered movements from the southwest and Þingeyjarsýsla to Wisconsin in 1870-72 established an important pattern that had great significance for Icelandic migration after 1873. In that year, the shipping situation was finally resolved when a large-scale transport was secured to carry emigrants from Iceland to Scotland.

CHAPTER 2

THE JOURNEY TO CANADA

A series of volcanic eruptions in Iceland between 1873 and 1875 had left nearly 5,000 Icelanders homeless. There was neither the room nor the economic base in Iceland during a period of recession to absorb the displaced, and this combined with an invitation from the then Governor General Lord Dufferin, led to a move to migrate to Canada.¹

The Icelanders are the only Scandinavians who directed their migration more to Canada than to the United States.² In attempting to explain why this pattern developed, Icelandic-Canadian writers and historians traditionally have relied on two mythic stories, both of which emphasize the high regard in which Icelanders were held by the upper echelons of the Canadian government. The idea that the Governor General Lord Dufferin had initiated Icelandic immigration to Canada gained considerable exposure when it appeared in Laura Goodman-Salverson's award-winning autobiography *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*.³ The historians Walter J. Lindal and Wilhelm Kristjanson popularized the story of a founding agreement—sometimes referred to as a 'Covenant'⁴—said to have been made with Canadian immigration officials when the 352 Icelandic migrants aboard the *SS. St. Patrick* arrived at Quebec in 1874. According to the story, the Wisconsin-bound Icelanders agreed to stay in the Dominion only after Canadian authorities had conceded to three key demands dictated by the immigrants. First, they were to enjoy full rights of citizenship as soon as they had fulfilled the

¹ David Arnason, "The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings," in David Arnason and Vincent Arnason, eds., *The New Icelanders: A North American Community* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), 3.

² Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "The Onset of Emigration from Iceland," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 9, 1-2 (1977), 89-90.

³ Laura Goodman Salverson, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 76.

⁴ S.J. Somerville, "Icelanders in Canada," *Canadian Geographical Journal*, 21, 4 (October 1940), 194.

residence requirements. Second, they were to be granted a large enough tract of land to form a settlement. Finally, they were to be permitted to preserve their language and culture for all time.⁵

Both stories have had profound significance for how people of Icelandic descent have defined their relationship with their ancestral and adopted homelands. Neither story, however, has ever been verified by the archival record. In his 1929 MA thesis, Angantyr Arnason wrote: “Whether the government ever formally assented to these terms will come to light when the Dominion Archives are searched.”⁶ In fact, no such document exists in the National Archives of Canada, and no mention of these terms appears in the correspondence surrounding the arrival of the *St. Patrick* Icelanders in September 1874. Despite the lack of archival evidence, however, it would be a mistake to disregard these stories. Rather, we must probe their meaning. Scottish historian Edward Cowan has defined a myth as “a codification of historical experience, real or imagined, past, present or yet to come, an essential construct which people define for themselves for the sake of self-preservation.”⁷ Icelandic-Canadians have developed and used these stories to help define their relationship with their adopted homeland.

Icelandic migration to Canada began with the arrival of two large groups in the summer of 1873 and the fall of 1874. Their arrival reflected both the dramatic increase in the volume of Icelandic emigration, and a fundamental change in the character of the

⁵ This story first appeared in Rögnvaldur Pétursson, “Þjóðræknissamtök meðal Íslendinga í Vesturheimi,” *Tímarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, 1 (1919), 98. It is also found in Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965), 18; Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Ottawa: the National Printers, 1967), 102.

⁶ Angantyr Arnason, “Icelandic Settlements in America” (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1929), 12.

⁷ Edward J. Cowan, “The Myth of Scotch Canada,” in Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance, eds., *Myth, Migration, and the Making of Memory* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1999), 56.

movement. Prior to 1873, Icelandic migrants to North America were primarily from merchant families or were the sons and daughters of relatively prosperous farmers. These people travelled in small groups and almost all were bound for Wisconsin. Whereas only twenty-two people had emigrated in 1872, at least 323 were on the move the following summer. Half this number travelled as one large group.⁸ In 1874, 351 out of a total of 391 emigrants travelled aboard one ship. In contrast to the earlier migrants, these two large groups came from many different strata of Icelandic society, ranging from those in the serving classes to farmers with capital. But why did this movement begin at this particular time, and why did so many go to Canada? What was the role of Lord Dufferin, and was there an ‘Icelandic Covenant’?

Helgi Skúli Kjartansson has argued that by 1870 Icelanders had most classic economic reasons to emigrate. That the movement did not begin until 1873 underlines how obstacles to emigration long had counteracted the economic push produced by a crisis in Icelandic rural society.⁹ He believes that the creation of Iceland’s first emigration agency—by the Allan steamship line—helped foster emigration by making transportation more readily available and by reducing the prohibitive costs. Kjartansson argues that the close ties of the Allan Line to the Canadian government, coupled with the fact that Icelandic emigration had no traditional North American destination, helped direct the initial bursts of mass migration to Canada rather than to Wisconsin.¹⁰ Kjartansson’s conclusions necessitate further analysis. An approach that integrates sources from both Iceland and Canada has the potential to reveal how the development of

⁸ Jónius H. Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of the Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983), xx.

⁹ Kjartansson, “The Onset,” 88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

a pattern of Icelandic migration to Canada was the result of formal and informal agencies in Iceland, continental Europe, and North America that stimulated the onset of mass migration.

More broadly, mass migration from Iceland to Canada was initiated by the fitful integration of the island into the globalizing economy in the late nineteenth century. Increases in the export of sheep and horses to Scotland not only afforded potential emigrants with the opportunity to convert their assets into the cash necessary for migration, but also facilitated the first leg of their journey by opening transportation corridors between Iceland and the North Atlantic transportation hub of Scotland. The Icelanders were sought out as passengers by the Allan Line at a time when a contraction in the number of British migrants travelling annually to North America necessitated an expansion into previously untapped markets. The Dominion of Canada and the government of Ontario offered generous subsidies to Icelanders because of the inability of traditional sources to meet the domestic demand for agricultural labourers and female domestic servants. The fact that the Icelanders travelled via Scotland was by no means inconsequential; this route brought them into a stream of migration that had been bringing people to Canada for most of the nineteenth century.

The increased mobility of Iceland's population illustrates how the island was being integrated into what Brinley Thomas has called 'Atlantic economy'. Thomas argued that the various national economies of the Atlantic region were intertwined in such a fundamental way that they must be understood as one economic region. The long-term growth in the Atlantic economy was fuelled by the free movement of excess labour and capital from the 'old country' into areas rich in land and natural resources in North

America.¹¹ People made individual choices about their destinations based on information, availability of jobs or land, and presence of friends and relatives in overseas locations. Thomas believed that by viewing these individual decisions collectively, discernable patterns can be observed.¹²

Migration historians have drawn upon Thomas's theories about the globalizing economy of the late nineteenth century and articulated a series of world 'migration systems' that have developed and changed over many centuries. A migration system involves an empirically observable series of clustered movements from a sending to a receiving society that continue over time.¹³ Relatively small movements, such as those of the Icelanders, were part of the larger *Euro-Atlantic system* that brought millions of Europeans from north of the Alps to North America.¹⁴

The repeatedly frustrated attempts to organize an Icelandic emigration to Brazil illustrate how the desire of migrants to travel to a region can be stifled by the lack of available transport. Migrants can have all the reason in the world to leave, and know exactly where they want to go, but if transport is not readily available the project likely will fail. The development of trade has gained increasing attention from migration historians for the important insights it can provide into why migrations begin, and why they are directed to a particular country or region of the world.

For the Icelanders and other European migrants after 1850, another of the facilitating factors in the migration process was the technological revolution in transport.

¹¹ Brinley Thomas, *Migration and Economic Growth: A Study of Great Britain and the Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26

¹³ Dirk Hoerder, "From Immigration to Migration Systems: New Concepts in Migration History," *OAH Magazine of History* 14, 1 (Fall 1999), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

The replacement of sail with steam navigation facilitated the greater mobility of people within the Atlantic world. Early steamships were rarely used in transatlantic migration because of high fuel costs. Their earliest use in moving people was as coastal transports that brought migrants to important foci of transatlantic travel such as Liverpool and Glasgow where they could board a sailing ship.¹⁵ The perfection of steamships in the 1850s and 1860s through the replacement of wood with iron hulls and paddle wheels with iron screw propulsion meant that vessels were able to offer more power, more efficient fuel usage, and stronger hulls that allowed for the construction of much larger ships. These changes led to the rapid replacement of sail by steam in the transatlantic passenger trade.

Steamships offered passengers three main advantages: reduced time at sea, bigger ships, and improved safety.¹⁶ Whereas sailing ships crossed the Atlantic in five weeks, by the 1870s the transatlantic passage could be as little as twelve days. Larger transatlantic steamers meant more room for migrant passengers, even in steerage class. Safety was improved both in terms of reduced risk of shipping accidents on the high seas, and in the health of the passengers. Larger iron-hulled ships propelled by iron screws were less likely to capsize or be destroyed in collisions. The faster crossing and improved health standards reduced the likelihood of disease breaking out, and as a result transatlantic mortality rates dropped by ninety percent.¹⁷

During the late nineteenth century the shipping lanes of the North Atlantic were the busiest in the world and transporting emigrants was the principal business of the big

¹⁵ Cameron, 141.

¹⁶ Drew Keeling, "The Transportation Revolution and Transatlantic Migration, 1850-1914," *Research in Economic History*, 19 (1999), 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

shipping lines.¹⁸ In order to secure the greatest volume of freight and the highest number of passengers possible, shipping companies developed a network of shipping agencies in Great Britain and Continental Europe. The transatlantic firms such as the Cunard, Allan, Dominion, Inman, Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt (HAPAG), and Nordwestdeutsche Lloyd (NDL) appointed head agents for each country, supplemented by a network of sub-agents throughout the country.¹⁹ These agents distributed emigration literature and booked freight and passengers for the transatlantic voyage.²⁰

Prior to 1873, there were no such shipping agents in Iceland who could book a transatlantic passage. As noted in chapter one, the migrants of 1870-72 travelled routes that involved a journey made and booked in stages, via either Copenhagen or Bergen, Norway, Hull, Liverpool and Quebec. This was a time consuming and expensive project, prohibitive for migrants with humble means. The entire trip of the 1870 groups cost about 130 *rikisdalir* (rd.), which was almost five times the annual wage of a male agricultural labourer and ten times that of a female domestic servant.²¹ One of the few 1870-72 migrants who did not travel via either Denmark or Norway was twenty-year-old Sigtryggur Jónasson from Ytri Skjaldarvík in Eyjafjarðarsýsla. He was able to eliminate the North Sea leg of the journey by travelling to Scotland instead of to one of the Scandinavian countries. He booked a journey aboard the Allan Line steamer *St. Andrew* in Glasgow, arriving at Quebec on 26 September 1872.²² Although Jónasson's route was

¹⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁹ Berit Brattne and Sune Åkerman, "The Importance of the Transport Sector for Mass Emigration," in Harald Runbolm and Hans Norman, eds., *From Sweden to America: A History of the Migration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 179.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Árni Gudmundsen, "Landnám Íslendinga á Washington-ejuni," in *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* (1900), 28-30; See also Jónsson and Magnússon, Table 12.2.

²² *The Globe*, 28 September 1872; Archives of Ontario (henceforth AO), Records of the Department of Immigration, RG 11-17, Arrival Destination Records, 1868-1881, p. 62.

not yet a common one for Icelandic migrants, the shipping line he travelled with was well known. In 1873 at least five small groups of Icelandic migrants travelled the routes that had brought the earliest pioneers to North America. Many followed established precedent in travelling from Liverpool to Quebec aboard the steamers belonging to the Scottish-Canadian Allan Line.²³

Based primarily in Glasgow and Liverpool, the Allan Line was the leading shipping firm offering service to the ports of the St. Lawrence and Halifax during the 1870s. The company's patriarch, Alexander 'Sandy' Allan, had built the firm in the decades following the Napoleonic Wars through the development of trade between the Clyde ports of Greenock and Glasgow and the St. Lawrence ports of Quebec and Montreal.²⁴ The company converted to steam in the 1850s, and a Canadian government contract for the carriage of mail between Canada and Great Britain gave the Allans an important advantage over their competitors.²⁵ In the same decade the firm opened a chain of shipping offices that created an administrative framework for the company's new steamship service.²⁶ The agents and the sub-agents who worked for the Allan Line distributed emigration literature produced both by the company and by governments. In 1867, the Allan Line took an important step in securing a share of the Scandinavian emigration market by becoming the first of the big shipping companies to establish

²³ A group of thirty-nine left Iceland aboard the barque *Pera*. See Kristinsson, 101-102, 104, 112-114, 125, 211, 213, 218, 353. A group of four left Reykjavík aboard the mail steamer *Diana* travelled to Copenhagen, then to Hull, and finally to Liverpool where they boarded the Allan Line's S.S. *Cornithian*. The group, which consisted of Pastor Jón Bjarnason and his wife Lara, Sigurjóna Laxdal, and Sigríður Erlendsdóttir, arrived at Quebec on 24 Sept. 1873. See National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Records of the Department of Immigration, RG 76, Quebec Passenger Arrivals, 1865-1921, reel C-4528, 28 October 1872 to 2 August 1874.

²⁴ Thomas Appleton, *Ravenscrag: The Allan Royal Mail Line* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974), 17-28.

²⁵ For the role of mail subsidies in developing steam navigation, see Freda Harcourt, "British Oceanic Mail Contracts in the age of Steam," *The Journal of Transport History*, 9, 1 (1988): 1-18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

agencies in Denmark.²⁷ The presence of Allan Line agents in Copenhagen helps explain why the early Icelandic migrants were so often Allan Line passengers.

The promotional efforts of the Allan Line and its agents were geared primarily towards Canada. This is understandable given the fact that most Allan Line ships went to Canadian ports, and that the Allan Line benefited from a mail subsidy paid by the Canadian government. The line advertised Canada through its advertisements in newspapers, by distributing Canadian emigration literature, and through the publication of its own emigration pamphlets. In 1872 the company released *Practical Hints and Directions to Intending Emigrants to Canada and the United States*. This publication enthusiastically proclaimed: "...there is good land available for cultivation in British America, with varied resources, sufficient to sustain more than 150,000,000 of a population."²⁸ The promotional efforts of the Allans were not, however, limited to Canada; they also advocated Virginia and North Carolina, as the line had recently begun service to Norfolk and Baltimore.²⁹

Sometime between 1870 and 1872, officials of the Allan Line became aware of the presence of small numbers of Icelanders among the polyglot mix of Europeans travelling on their ships. In order to tap into this potential market they began to correspond with Reykjavík merchant Guðmundur Lambertsen. In the fall of 1872, Lambertsen was appointed Allan Line agent for Iceland, and shortly afterwards began advertising his services in *Norðanfari*. He notified intending emigrants that if sufficient numbers of people were interested, the Allans would be willing to send a steamer to

²⁷ Brattne and Åkerman, 179.

²⁸ *Practical Hints and Directions to Intending Emigrants to Canada and the United States* (Liverpool: Allan Bros., 1872), 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

Iceland to take them direct to either Quebec or Portland, Maine, thus eliminating the need for a costly and time-consuming detour to continental Europe. Lambertsen emphasized that these ports were the best starting points for those intending to travel to Wisconsin.³⁰ While he could not specify the fare, he assured the Icelanders that the cost of passage would be less than in years past: “[Last year, the cost of] travel from here to Wisconsin exceeded 100 rd. Of course we can hope that transportation by the company’s steamships will be considerably cheaper and even more so if many people take advantage of the trip....”³¹ He urged those planning on emigrating to abandon the hope that the American government might provide them with free transportation; he argued that thousands of people streamed to the U.S. every year without any such assistance.³²

Lambertsen’s offers found a ready audience among many people in the northern districts of Eyjafjarðarsýsla and Þingeyjarsýsla where emigration had been contemplated since 1859-60 when discussions had centred around emigration to Greenland and Brazil. The focus was now quickly shifting to North America, due to the well-publicized migrations of Þingeyjarsýsla natives such as the young student Páll Þorláksson. Páll had emigrated in the summer of 1872, and frequently wrote home to his father Þorlákur G. Jónsson reporting on the conditions and prospects of the Icelanders in Wisconsin. Þorlákur passed Páll’s letters on to the editor of *Norðanfari*. Eventually Páll began sending letters addressed directly to the editor. Páll’s cautious optimism about the prospects for Icelanders in the United States is the most salient feature of these letters. He urged his countrymen not to expect to become rich overnight and emphasized that success in America required a great deal of hard work:

³⁰ *Norðanfari*, 8 January 1873. The letter was dated Reykjavík, 7 December 1872.

³¹ *Ibid.* All translations by Gunnur Ísfeld unless otherwise specified.

³² *Ibid.*

It would be best for immigrants, especially Icelanders, not to try immediately to go it on their own, but rather to apply themselves first to acquiring as much essential knowledge as possible and not be too greedy or ambitious, for that is not to their advantage... If we Icelanders establish a colony here it appears not at all unlikely that we might in time increase our numbers, prosper and attain a more advantageous position in the ranks of peoples and with all our other good qualities, greater prominence on the stage of history.³³

By the time readers of *Norðanfari* saw this letter, plans were already well under way for a migration west. During the winter of 1872-73 a group of forty-two farmers from Eyjafjarðarsýsla and Þingeyjarsýsla formed an emigration society and Þorlákur was appointed chairman.³⁴ With more information about Wisconsin coming to the people of the northern districts than ever before, it was this destination that was considered when the farmers were considering emigration to America. Two problems stood in the way of this proposed emigration: lack of a transport large enough to take a sizeable group of emigrants, and the need to liquidate assets into the cash necessary for the journey. Lambertsen's offer held the potential to solve the first problem, but no such project could be contemplated unless those considering emigration had the cash to pay their passage.

Farmers are heavily represented among the 1873 emigrants as recorded in Júníus H. Kristinsson's emigration register *Vesturfaraskra, 1870-1914: A Record of the Emigrants to North America, 1870-1914*. This record contains the names, ages, and occupations for over 14,000 Icelandic emigrants. Unfortunately, it does not specify whether the farmers were freeholders or tenants, although it is likely that most were from the latter class. As in many other European countries, the bulk of Iceland's land was concentrated in the hands of a small number of landowners. In 1850, only about 17

³³ Ibid., 19 April 1873. Translated and quoted in George Houser, *Pioneer Icelandic Pastor: The Life of the Reverend Paul Thorklaksson* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society, 1990), 27.

³⁴ Houser, 23.

percent of the country's farmers were freeholders.³⁵ The land tenures were usually only one or two years in duration, meaning that farmers moved often. A study of farmers' mobility patterns in the northern district of Skagafjarðarsýsla during the nineteenth century found that 25 percent moved once, 17 percent moved twice, and 20 percent moved three times or more.³⁶

Many of the farmers who emigrated in 1873 had likely moved between different holdings before and thus had a tradition of internal migration within the country. For this reason many farmers chose to invest in mobile assets such as livestock instead of making improvements on land that they might not be inhabiting for very long and for which they would not be remunerated once they vacated.³⁷ It was not just independent or tenant farmers who held livestock. Many of the *húsmenn* class, which consisted of men who lived with a farmer while waiting to strike out on their own, also kept small numbers of animals among the farmer's herds.³⁸ The poor laws even required non-farming cottars to keep a few animals for subsistence purposes.³⁹ Farmers and *húsmenn* were the two most conspicuous classes among the emigrants from the north in 1873, and both needed to find a market for their livestock before setting out for North America. The development of trade between Iceland and Great Britain provided these emigrants with this opportunity.

Although money had been used as a unit of calculation in Iceland since the eighteenth century, most of the island's trade was carried out in kind. As a result, there

³⁵ Guðmundur Jónsson, "Institutional Change in Icelandic Agriculture, 1780-1940," *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 41, 2 (1993), 110.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁹ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 231.

was a constant lack of cash in the economy.⁴⁰ This situation began to change with the relaxation of Danish trade restrictions in the 1850s. On 1 April 1855, a new law was passed that equalized the trading rights of Danish subjects and foreigners in Iceland. This led to an increase in trade with Great Britain in live animals, particularly sheep and horses.⁴¹ Farmers in the north-eastern and eastern parts took advantage of this new market by forming the cooperative trading company *Gránufelag* in 1869. Trade in sheep and horses with Great Britain increased substantially during the 1870s.⁴² The British buyers' purchases, paid in silver and gold, represented a direct influx of cash into the hands of farmers.⁴³

Meetings held in Akureyri in early 1873 always discussed emigration and the sale of sheep and horses together as many of the farmers felt that disposing of their assets at a fair price was a precondition for their emigration.⁴⁴ At a meeting held in Akureyri in February 1873, the groups discussed how they might dispose of their livestock.⁴⁵ They called upon Tryggvi Gunnarsson, director of the *Gránufelag*, to find a market for their animals. On 16 April 1873, a meeting was held to discuss both the proposal made by Lambertsen, and the prospect of the sale of sheep to Englishmen. A letter from Þorlákur G. Jónsson was read in which he announced that Lambertsen and Tryggvi Gunnarsson were in agreement that they should proceed to England to negotiate the sale of sheep and horses. It was also decided that Þorlákur would work as Lambertsen's agent, taking on the task of signing up emigrants in the north and east of the country.⁴⁶ He was to be

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 244-245.

⁴¹ Karlsson, 244.

⁴² Jónsson and Magnússon, Table 10.11, 479.

⁴³ Karlsson, 246.

⁴⁴ *Norðanfari*, 28 May 1873.

⁴⁵ Houser, 23.

⁴⁶ *Norðanfari*, 19 April 1873.

assisted in this task by two other leading proponents of emigration—Páll Magnússon from Kjarna and Ólafur Ólafsson from Syðri-Espihóll; these two men would also be engaged in taking commitments from farmers for the sale of animals. The minutes of the meeting were printed in the next issue of *Norðanfari*, along with a second advertisement from Lambertsen announcing that the proposed fare from Iceland to Quebec would be 85 rd.⁴⁷

On 23 May, another meeting was held that underlined the importance of the livestock sale to the whole emigration project. It was reported to the group that Þorlákur G. Jónsson had hesitated in making concrete arrangements with Lambertsen until the sale of the animals was secured: “[as] the emigration from here West was conditional upon selling all the participants’ livestock, he had not dared make a binding contract with Lambertsen for a ship.”⁴⁸ Instead, Þorlákur requested that Lambertsen go to Scotland and make shipping arrangements based on the progress of the livestock sale. Þorlákur’s hesitance proved to be wise, as Tryggvi Gunnarsson and Lambertsen had difficulty finding a buyer for livestock. After a difficult search, the pair concluded a contract with a Scottish horse trader named Walker to purchase 200 horses and 2,000 sheep for between 36-40 rd. a head for horses, and 7-10 rd. for sheep. The price was lower than the Icelanders had hoped, but it was adequate for many to continue with their plans. Other farmers had to back out because the deal had not included any cattle.⁴⁹

The disappointing negotiations in Scotland crushed Lambertsen’s hopes of bringing a ship to Iceland that would take the group directly to Quebec. Instead, he concluded a deal with Walker to convey the Icelanders to Scotland aboard the same

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 28 May 1873.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

freighter as their horses, sometime between 16 and 20 of July. In the 28 May issue of *Norðanfari*, he triumphantly announced that the Scottish detour would actually reduce the cost of passage for the emigrants by 12 rd.⁵⁰ The Scottish trade connection thus not only ensured that the Icelanders had sufficient capital to make the voyage, but provided a physical means of transport on the first leg of the journey.

Lambertsen was well aware of the problems that many of the potential emigrants would have in financing the trip. In spite of his admonishments to the emigrants not to hold out hope of assisted passage, he did not give up searching for some way to further reduce the cost of the voyage. It is likely that he was motivated in this search by a desire to make good on his promise to the Allans of having 400 emigrant passengers for the proposed sailing to Quebec.⁵¹ While the American government was not in the business of assisting parties of emigrants, the Allans made Lambertsen aware of the possibility of the Canadian government providing financial help. On 25 April 1873, Allan Line agent John Ennis wrote to William Dixon, senior Canadian emigration agent in London, informing him of the company's dealings with Lambertsen and the expected emigration of the Icelanders that summer. Ennis told Dixon:

We showed to Mr. Lambertsen that Canada of all other countries was the most suitable place for his countrymen to settle as a means of inducing his people to abandon the idea of becoming settlers in the States of Wisconsin [sic]. We suggested to him the probability of the Canadian Government being disposed to grant such assistance as would be likely to cause the emigrants to decide in favour of Canada...we have no doubt whatever but that the entire emigration from Iceland could be secured to Canada if the Government of the latter country would undertake to bear a portion of the expense.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ NAC, Records of the Department of Agriculture, RG 17, vol. 84, file 8168, William Dixon to John Lowe, 26 April 1873.

⁵² Ibid.

Lambertsen took back to Iceland with him all the Canadian emigration pamphlets the Allans had in stock. He was sufficiently impressed with what he saw to pen a letter to Canadian Minister of Agriculture J.H. Pope officially asking for assistance: "...I am commissioned to inquire whether [sic] your Government would be willing to grant [the emigrants] any assistance towards paying the expense of their passage or free passage in case they resolve to make Canada their future home."⁵³ William Dixon forwarded the letters from Ennis and Lambertsen on to John Lowe, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture in Ottawa. Lowe responded that "...an immigration of Icelanders is much desired in Canada."⁵⁴

The timing of Lambertsen's offer was fortuitous. The Dominion of Canada had recently stepped up its advertising campaign in its perpetual struggle to secure a greater portion of the emigration market from its main rival the United States, as well as from Australia and New Zealand. Canadian officials had long been concerned that too many immigrants were simply passing through Quebec on their way to the United States. In the early 1870s the Dominion began to take concrete steps to ensure that a steady supply of immigrants would choose to make Canada their home. They did this at first by offering assisted passage and other inducements to people of the 'desired classes' from Great Britain and continental Europe. The 'desired classes' included farmers with capital, agricultural labourers, and female domestic servants.⁵⁵ People who were not likely to settle on the land, such as clerks and tradespeople, were actively discouraged.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ NAC, RG 17, A 1 2, vol. 1507, p. 100, Lowe to Dixon, 22 May 1873.

⁵⁵ H. Gordon Skilling, *Canadian Representation Abroad: From Agency to Embassy* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945), 14.

Pauper emigration, too, was resisted as it was felt that emigrants who were unable to take care of themselves would place an onerous burden on the government.

In 1872 the Canadian government adopted two measures to attract and keep immigrants. First, they implemented the 'Passenger Warrant' system that provided assistance to emigrants in defraying the cost of their passage. This arrangement amounted to a reduction in the cost of passage from £6.6s to £4.5s for trips from ports in Great Britain to Canada. For some agricultural labourers and female domestics, a further reduction of the fare to £2.5s was provided.⁵⁶ The Allan Line was the Canadian government's key partner in this new arrangement.

The passenger warrant system was overseen by the network of emigration agents working to promote Canada's interests in the major centres of recruiting countries. In addition to these federal agents, many of the provincial governments also employed agents to promote their specific interests. Under the British North America Act, 1867, the Dominion government and the provinces shared concurrent powers with respect to immigration. Provincial governments could enact laws relating to immigration within their jurisdiction, but they were prevented from passing any legislation that was contradictory to that of the federal government in the same sphere.⁵⁷ This arrangement was meant to ensure that in the promotion of immigration the specific needs of the provinces would be fairly represented. The provinces sought to obtain the types and volume of immigrants needed to fill demands in the labour market, and to promote their own economic development plans, such as the opening of frontier land.

⁵⁶ Norman Macdonald, *Canada Immigration and Colonization* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 108.

⁵⁷ Canada, "British North America Act, 1867 - Enactment no. 1, Sub-Section 95," *Department of Justice Canada/Ministère de la Justice Canada*, website (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2002, accessed 11 March 2002); available on: <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/loireg/rapport/en/p111-3.html>.

In addition to supervising the Passenger Warrant system, the Dominion agents also oversaw the second part of Canada's emigration promotion efforts—an increase in advertising and paid bonuses and commissions. In 1872, \$700,000 was put aside this purpose. Canada was to be advertised in newspapers, magazines, on posters, and at agricultural fairs. The commissions, which were paid to the booking agents of the steamship companies, were particularly important in helping direct migrants to Canada. The shipping companies routinely allowed booking agents to deduct 5 percent from the gross amount of the passage money to the point of destination. This induced the agents to book longer overland journeys that took migrants to destinations in the United States. As well, American land and railway companies often paid commissions to the agents for sending emigrants.⁵⁸ Canada sought to trump this advantage by offering the booking agents a higher commission of 6s. 3d. per adult migrant. In 1873, a special commission of \$2 was paid for emigrants who qualified for Passenger Warrants and were considered desirable by the agents in the field.⁵⁹ The province of Ontario also offered a bonus of \$6 per adult immigrant of the desired classes for all those who stayed in the province for three months. This policy was initiated in 1872 as another measure to compete with the United States, Australia, New Zealand and even the other provinces.⁶⁰ After arriving in Quebec, immigrants intending to stay in Canada were offered free inland transport and meals on route to their final destination.

The aggressive recruitment efforts launched by the Canadian government in the early 1870s had included a big push to gain a share of the Scandinavian emigration

⁵⁸ Macdonald, 46.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1874, no. 5, p. ix.

market. To this end the Dominion government dispatched William McDougall to the Scandinavian Kingdoms in January 1873. McDougall was commissioned to employ a network of local agents and pay them a commission of \$2 per adult emigrant, distribute literature about Canada, and make special arrangements for groups of Scandinavians wishing to emigrate.⁶¹ McDougall's efforts were hampered by the fact that the Scandinavian countries were already replete with networks of emigration agents serving American interests. New agencies starting up were required by legislation to post a bond of \$4,000-6,000 in most countries. McDougall solved the problem by enlisting agents of the Allan Line as agents for the Canadian government. They were paid the commission of \$2 per adult emigrant.⁶²

McDougall also sought to increase the amount that could be deducted from the cost of passage by extending the passenger warrant system. The original agreement only covered passage from Great Britain, so the journey from the continent to Liverpool or Glasgow had to be borne completely by the emigrants. Through extended negotiations with the Allan and Dominion lines, McDougall was able to conclude an agreement whereby the passage from the continent was lowered to the same level as that from Great Britain. This was achieved through the payment of a £1 or \$5 subsidy per approved emigrant by the Dominion Government to the shipping lines. People eligible to receive such assistance were restricted to families whose head was under 40, and unmarried women under 30.⁶³ Despite these efforts, McDougall and his agents achieved little

⁶¹ Lars Ljungmark, "Canada's Campaign for Scandinavian Immigration, 1873-1876," *The Swedish American Historical Quarterly*, 33, 1 (January 1982), 24.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27.

success, as the United States was well established as the common destination for emigrants from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden.

They fared no better in attracting the small groups of Icelanders who were passing under their noses at the Scandinavian ports. None of the Icelandic migrants who travelled via Copenhagen or Norway in 1873 settled initially in Canada even though most travelled on Allan Line steamers. It was only groups that travelled via Scotland that decided to try Canada. While McDougall was in Liverpool negotiating with the Allans in May 1873, Allan agent John Ennis informed him of the impending Icelandic emigration. On 3 June, McDougall reported back to Ottawa on the matter stating: "their chief exports are cattle, sheep, and fish, and the northern part of Scotland is their principal market. The course of emigration, if once established, should naturally be *via* Scotland."⁶⁴

McDougall was unaware that Ennis had already set in motion arrangements to transport the emigrants in just such a way. Acting on Ennis's information, Department of Agriculture secretary Lowe had already instructed William Dixon, the Dominion Agent in London, to provide the cheapest class of warrants available for the Icelandic emigrants for the second leg of their journey from Scotland to Quebec.⁶⁵

The Icelandic emigration society in the north that was preparing to emigrate in the summer of 1873 appears to have had little or no knowledge of the efforts being made on their behalf by Lambertsen, the Allans and the Canadian government. Lambertsen does not seem to have informed the society of his overtures, and there is little indication that Canada was discussed as a possible destination. While letters from numerous correspondents in Wisconsin were being read, circulated, and published, news from

⁶⁴ "Report of Special Mission of Hon. W. McDougall, C.B.," *Canada, Sessional Papers*, 1873, no. 19, p. 62.

⁶⁵ NAC, RG 17, A 18, vol. 1665, p. 100, Lowe to Dixon, 22 May 1873.

Canada was scarce. Sigtryggur Jónasson later claimed to have written letters home to his friends and family after arriving in Ontario via Scotland in September 1872, but these were never published. Canada did receive some attention when the founding of a Danish colony in New Brunswick was reported in *Norðanfari*.⁶⁶

Although the plans to transport the emigrants and their horses simultaneously to Scotland seemed to be to the advantage of all, several problems were to provoke a great deal of dissatisfaction. As the month of July progressed, the roughly 200 emigrants who had signed up for the voyage began to make their way to the port of Akureyri. Most expected the ship to arrive around 20 July, but the steamer *Queen* did not dock in Akureyri until 2 August. Some families waited as long as sixteen days.⁶⁷ There was insufficient accommodation for such an influx in the little northern town, and many were forced to spend funds allotted for the journey on meagre accommodations and food.

When the emigrants boarded the *Queen* on 4 August they were shocked by the conditions. Björn Kristján Skagfjörð said that the emigrants dubbed the ship “Walker’s floating stables”.⁶⁸ Guðmundur Stefánsson wrote a letter describing the ship’s quarters to his sister: “it was a terrible place, cramped hot and intolerably smelly because of all the horses. They were packed tightly together the whole length of the hold and up and down in pens on both sides of the canvas partition.”⁶⁹ Páll Magnússon, one of the leaders in the emigration movement, was so disgusted with the ship’s conditions that he refused to go and, shortly after the ship had departed, he wrote a vitriolic account of the episode that

⁶⁶ *Norðanfari*, 31 January 1873.

⁶⁷ According to the diary of Jón Jónsson from Mjóadal, his family arrived in Akureyri on 17 July. NAC, R7835-04-E, Diary of Jón Jónsson.

⁶⁸ See *Norðanfari*, 3 December 1873.

⁶⁹ Viðar Hreinsson and Jón Karl Helgason eds., “The Voyage across the Atlantic in 1873, recorded by Guðmundur Stefánsson,” trans. & notes by Stefán Karlsson, *The Icelandic Emigration*, website (Reykjavík, Iceland: RUV, 1999-2000, accessed 4 October 2002); Available on: <http://servefir.ruv.is/vesturfara/e/FyrGudmund.html>.

was later serialized in the pages of *Norðanfari*. He claimed that Walker had broken the original contract with Lambertsen, forcing the emigrants to pay 4½ rd. more for each adult ticket.⁷⁰ Many emigrants were told to go home because Walker stated that the *Queen* could hold only 120 people. Nonetheless, he and Lambertsen eventually managed to pack a total of 153 people and 200 horses on board the steamer.⁷¹ The party, accompanied by Lambertsen, disembarked at Granton on the eastern coast of Scotland on 9 August. They were met by agents of the Allan Line who organized their trip by train to Glasgow and arranged for their meals and accommodations. The Icelanders boarded the *SS. Manitoban*, bound for Quebec City via Liverpool, arriving on the 25 August 1873.

While the group was in Glasgow, Lambertsen had met with Alexander Begg, Ontario Emigration Agent for Scotland, who claimed credit for arranging the whole affair. Begg wrote to John Lowe, triumphantly announcing that he had succeeded in diverting the current of Icelandic emigration from the United States to Canada.⁷² He claimed that he had done this by inducing the ‘agent from Iceland’, undoubtedly Lambertsen, to agree to a commission in return for promoting the interests of Canada. Begg asked Lowe if the Dominion government would be willing to provide both him and Lambertsen a commission for inducing Icelanders to come to Canada.⁷³ Begg’s request was flatly refused, but not before he made arrangements for the group to be received by emigration officials in Quebec and Toronto.

It was either in Scotland or on board the *Manitoban* that approximately 115 members of the group were recruited to become labourers in Ontario. Björn Kristján

⁷⁰ *Norðanfari*, 17 March 1874.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² NAC, RG 17, vol. 92, file 8941, Alexander Begg to Lowe, 18 August 1873.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Skagfjörð wrote "...we probably would have all headed for Milwaukee had Lambertsen not made arrangements for us to go to Ontario."⁷⁴ Páll Thorlaksson had been informed of the Icelanders' departure and was waiting for the group when they arrived at Quebec. Migrant Jón Þórðarsson reported that "upon arrival in Quebeck [sic], Páll Þorláksson was present and said that he had found places for 150 people with farmers out on the [Wisconsin] countryside, if need be, but we had hired ourselves to Ontario..."⁷⁵

Approximately forty-three members of the group had made no such arrangements and proceeded with Páll to Wisconsin. These were primarily chain migrants following the earlier movements of friends and relatives from their home region. These included Páll Thorlaksson's own family, and many friends and neighbours from Ljósvatnshreppur in Þingeyjarsýsla. Hallgrímur Thorlacius from Eyjafjarðarsýsla and his family went to Milwaukee to meet his father, and Helga Sigurðardóttir from Reykjavík was taking her ten children to be reunited with their father Einar.⁷⁶

Where does Lord Dufferin enter the story? Apparently, Lowe had been influenced by advice he received from the Governor General. In a personal letter to Dixon, Lowe wrote, "The Governor General has told me privately that the Icelanders are a very fine class of people and would make very valuable settlers."⁷⁷ His affection for the Icelanders was based on a trip he had made to the island in the 1850s. His favourable impressions of the land and its people were published in his travelogue *Letters from High Latitudes*.⁷⁸ The gentle encouragement Dufferin offered to Lowe appears to have been

⁷⁴ Translated and quoted in Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: The Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000), 91.

⁷⁵ *Norðanfari*, 3 December 1873.

⁷⁶ Guðmundur Stefánsson in Hreinsson and Helgason.

⁷⁷ NAC, RG 17, A 18, vol. 1665, p. 93, Lowe to Dixon, 18 September 1873.

⁷⁸ Frederick Temple Blackwood, Earl of Dufferin, *Letters from High Latitudes; Being Some Account of a Voyage, in 1856 ... to Iceland, Jan Mayen, and Spitzbergen* (Leipzig, Tauchnitz., 1891).

the extent of his involvement; the Icelanders did not come to Canada on his personal invitation.

The Canadian authorities were generally pleased with how the arrangements had turned out and began making arrangements to attract more Icelanders to the Dominion. Lowe instructed Dixon to arrange to pay Lambertsen a commission of \$2 per head on every adult immigrant that he sent to Canada. During the course of the next year, agents of the Dominion of Canada and the province of Ontario, sometimes working at cross-purposes, worked to bring out the next large group of Icelanders with the help of two agents in Iceland. These various parties set in motion a Byzantine set of political entanglements that ultimately proved detrimental to the interests of the emigrants themselves.

Guðmundur Lambertsen was no longer the only steamship agent in Iceland. Páll Magnússon's experience with Lambertsen and Walker—and by association the Allan Line—had proved so infuriating that he resolved to set up his own shipping agency to prevent a recurrence of the events of 1873. To this end Páll placed himself in contact with the Norwegian American Steamship Line of Christiana (Oslo). The passage of a group of ten emigrants by this line from Bergen to New York during the summer of 1873 was well publicized in Iceland.⁷⁹ The company, which began operation in 1870, was trying to capitalize on the large Norwegian emigration market by offering direct service from Christiana and Bergen to New York.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Norðanfari*, 9 August 1873.

⁸⁰ N.R.P. Bonsor, *North Atlantic Seaway: An illustrated history of the passenger services linking the old world with the new* (Prescot, Lancashire: T. Stephenson & Sons Ltd., 1955), 271.

Páll Magnússon succeeded in getting himself appointed as agent for Iceland. In the 3 December 1873 issue of *Norðanfari*, he made the following offer to intending emigrants for the 1874 season:

If 100-200 people have by the end of next February, in writing or verbally asked me to book a fare for them directly from here to North America next summer, anywhere in the country, at much lower prices than Icelanders have previously had to pay, I hereby announce that I have full assurance that the Norwegian American Steamship Co, in Christania (Oslo) will have one of their large, strongly built steamships call in Akureyri, and other safe harbors in the country, on its way west to North America next June, to transport Westfarers directly to New York, and from there by train anywhere they wish in North America.⁸¹

Magnússon pointed out the inefficiency of travelling first to Great Britain and the inconvenience of having to board ships with people of all nations, "...many of them ornery, and Irishmen have mainly proven to be resentful fellows, drunkards, impertinent, thievish..."⁸² On 17 January 1874, Magnússon was able to announce that the fare directly from Iceland to New York would be a mere 66 rd. 20 sk. for adults, and half that amount for children from 1-14 years.⁸³ Magnússon asked that those intending to make the trip send him a 10 rd. registration fee as a down payment on the voyage.

Lambertsen, on the other hand, was now a commissioned agent of the Canadian Government. He defended himself against the accusations made by Magnússon in the *Queen* affair and made a new offer of his own to potential emigrants in direct competition with Magnússon. That this offer was specifically for immigration to Canada illustrates how Lambertsen had embraced his role as commissioner, and how Canada was becoming better known. Letters from the emigrants of 1873 were beginning to filter back to Iceland with cautiously optimistic reports of conditions in Ontario. Jón Þórðarsson noted for the

⁸¹ *Norðanfari*, 3 December 1873.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17 January 1874.

readers of *Norðanfari*: “The land has immense wooded areas with marshland in between, the grass is said to reach to the armpits. Those settled there have built their houses along a river which is said to be teeming with fish. Here an adult male is paid \$20.00 a month for woodcutting, with free board and lodging.”⁸⁴

Lambertsen began advertising a possible summer sailing in June 1874. He offered emigrants passage to New Brunswick, Ontario, or other parts of Canada. Included in his advertisement was a declaration from Col. Hans Mattson, who had replaced McDougall as Dominion Emigration agent in the Scandinavian Kingdoms, confirming the official nature of Lambertsen’s offer:

The Canadian Government hereby offers 200 acres of free land to any married couple and their children, but 100 acres to unmarried ones; as well as assistance in getting there, 9 rd per adult, half that or 4 rd per child, 3 marks. In addition to this they offer free transportation by trains from a place of entry in Canada to a place of choice for settlement...The Agent, Mr. Guðm. Lambertsen, Reykjavík, has authority to transport people under this agreement.⁸⁵

Lambertsen offered passage from England to Canada for 40 rd 40 sk per adult and half that amount for children. He proposed a similar project as the year before, offering to arrange for the sale of livestock to Englishmen, and claimed that by taking advantage of his offer, emigrants could save 20-30 rd off the usual cost of transport.⁸⁶ The competition between Lambertsen and Magnússon split the potential emigrant market in two, resulting in a situation where neither man signed up sufficient numbers for the project he had proposed.

Iceland was not the only market in which there was stiff competition for emigrants. The New York bank crash of 1873 marked the beginning of a severe

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3 December 1873.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 23 June 1874.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

commercial depression, first in the United States but then more generally. This had the effect of curtailing immigration numbers that had been steadily improving since 1867. The number of people arriving in Ontario decreased in 1874, and again the following year.⁸⁷ In 1875, Ontario Immigration Commissioner Adam Crooks stated, "...the prostration of all industries arising from the financial panic in the United States was used by the opponents of immigration as a convincing argument in their favour."⁸⁸ The economic problems did not entirely eliminate the persistent demand for female domestic servants and male agricultural labourers, but in the context of a shrinking outflow from Britain, the large network of overseas agents working for the federal and provincial governments sought to justify their own existence by intensifying their recruitment efforts and looking to less traditional sources of emigration. The Icelanders were able to fill many of the necessary criteria for desirable immigrants and as a result were recruited aggressively.

The leader of the Dominion effort to recruit the Icelanders was U.S. Civil War Colonel Hans Mattson, an emigrant Swede who had previously had success recruiting Scandinavians for Minnesota. Mattson cultivated both Lambertsen and Magnússon, assuming that both would be able to follow through on their respective plans. He wrote to John Lowe in February 1874 informing him of Magnússon's planned emigration to the United States, and stating that 600 emigrants would likely be on board when the Norwegian-American steamer left Iceland bound for New York.⁸⁹ He convinced

⁸⁷ "Report of the Department of Immigration of the Province of Ontario for the year 1876," *Ontario, Sessional Papers, 1875-76*, no. 60, p. vi.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1875, no. 3, p. vi.

⁸⁹ NAC, RG 17, A 1 2, vol. 1509, p. 100, Lowe to Col. Hans Mattson, 12 March 1874. Ontario agent Alexander Begg also heard about the potential emigration, and tried once again, unsuccessfully, to get himself appointed as a special agent to Iceland. See NAC, RG 17, vol. 109, file 10673, Begg to Lowe, 25 Apr. 1874.

Magnússon and the Norwegian-American Line to re-route their journey to Halifax where they could be received by Canadian Immigration officials. Mattson also informed the department that Lambertsen's group would come via Leith; he expressed his hope that Canadian timber shipped to Scotland could be traded with Iceland, thus making transport available for emigrants on the return voyage.⁹⁰ With this information in hand, the Canadian government prepared for the arrival of the Icelanders. The Ontario government, which had been informed of the movement by the Icelanders already settled in the province, dispatched Sigtryggur Jónasson to meet the Norwegian ship in Halifax and conduct the group to Ontario. Páll Magnússon had also informed Jóhannes Arngrímsson, an 1872 migrant, of the ship's arrival, and he, too, went to Halifax to meet it for the purpose of bringing the people to Wisconsin.⁹¹

In the 23 June issue of *Norðanfari*, Magnússon announced that the Norwegian-American freighter *St. Olaf* would be calling at Akureyri and Sauðárkrókur between 10 and 12 July. The fare would be 65 rd. 25 sk., but the Canadian Government was prepared to knock 9 rd off the cost if emigrants informed agents aboard ship of their intention to settle in the Dominion.⁹² With the plans firmly in place some 400 emigrants began to make preparations for the voyage west. Magnússon had originally planned to leave with the emigrants, but his health was deteriorating rapidly due to tuberculosis, and his illness prevented him from taking an active role in repairing the situation when his carefully-laid plans began to unravel.

⁹⁰ NAC, RG 17, vol. 112, file 10971, Mattson to Lowe, 1 June 1874; *Ibid.*, vol. 114, file 11124, Edward Jenkins to Lowe, 27 June 1874.

⁹¹ AO, Pamphlet 1977, no. 116, Icelandic Immigration to Canada and Ontario [sic], 1874, Journal of Jón Rögnvaldsson, translated by V. Eylands.

⁹² *Norðanfari*, 23 June 1874.

The Norwegian-American Line changed the initial arrangements made with Magnússon. They demanded that he forward to them 15,000 rd. prior to the ship leaving Norway. Due to the slowness of the mail, Magnússon did not receive the demands until it was impossible to gather the full amount of the deposit and send it to the company.⁹³ The deal with the Norwegians was off, and the emigrants were once again left waiting in port for a ship, this time for over a month. As far as anyone in Canada knew, the Icelanders had left aboard the Norwegian steamer in early July. Jónasson and Arngrímsson anxiously awaited their arrival, and the immigration officials in Halifax, Quebec, Toronto, and Ottawa puzzled as to what had happened to the steamer. On 10 August *The Globe* reported: “some anxiety is felt at the non-arrival of a vessel which left Norway, July 2nd, with one hundred Iceland families for [Halifax].”⁹⁴ Ontario Immigration Secretary David Spence wrote to Jónasson on the 20 August stating that he feared the worst.⁹⁵

Magnússon sent his friend Eggert Gunnarsson to Reykjavík to find someone who could arrange for a ship. He hoped to make contact with a student named Jón Hjaltalín in Scotland, whom he hoped could arrange something. In his desperation, Magnússon even suggested that Lambertsen might be able to help. For his part, Lambertsen had been utterly unsuccessful in his attempts to repeat the project carried out the year before. This may have been partially due to a dramatic decrease in exports of sheep and horses from the year before.⁹⁶ Lambertsen agreed to go to Scotland to try to find a steamer.

⁹³ Ibid., 11 August 1874.

⁹⁴ *The Globe*, 10 August 1874.

⁹⁵ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 764, Spence to Jónasson, 20 August 1874.

⁹⁶ See Jónsson and Magnússon, 479.

An account of Lambertsen's efforts in Scotland is contained in the annual report of Ontario agent Peter Byrne for the year 1874. Byrne stated that Lambertsen arrived in Glasgow in July to charter a ship, but that he grossly underestimated the costs involved. He tried to get the Allans to cover the shortfall, but they refused. Lambertsen then approached Byrne: "He made an anxious appeal to me to help him, by advancing the bonus money for 300 adults, whom he would guarantee should all settle in Ontario."⁹⁷

Byrne added:

[Lambertsen] was almost in despair at the prospect of another failure, the effect of which would be to check the emigration movement among the Icelanders, and to expose to much loss, inconvenience and suffering, the poor people who had already assembled at a couple of seaports, wearily and anxiously waiting for the vessel which was to bear them to their new home.⁹⁸

Byrne notified his superiors in London of the situation and was told to enter into negotiations with the Allans to send a ship to Iceland. After much discussion, the Allans agreed to send a vessel. Finally, on 4 August, the Allan Line steamer *St. Patrick* docked in Akureyri. Many of those who had gathered at the port during the previous two months had given up hope and gone home, and notification had to be made that the ship had finally arrived. A total of 351 people boarded the *St. Patrick* at Akureyri and Sauðarkrókur. The ship proceeded directly to Quebec, where it arrived on 23 September 1874.⁹⁹

To finance this trip, the Allan Line had to recover the passage money that Páll Magnússon had deposited in Copenhagen for the ill-fated Norwegian-American Line project. The deposits of both the Lambertsen and Magnússon groups amounted to

⁹⁷ "Mr. Peter Byrne's Report," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 3, p. 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ AO, Pamphlet 1977, no. 116, Icelandic Immigration to Canada and Ontario, 1874 – The Diary of Jón Rögnvaldsson.

£1429.6.0. The Allans also received £ 307.6.8 from the Dominion Government for passage warrants, and £345.6.8 from the Ontario Government in the form of the advanced Ontario bonus of \$6 per adult migrant, bringing the grand total to £2081.19.4.¹⁰⁰ The Icelanders were apparently unaware of these arrangements; they believed that the bonuses had been paid to Lambertsen, and that he therefore had defrauded them of 4s 8d per head.¹⁰¹ For his part Lambertsen claimed never to have seen the bonus and stated that he was unsure whether or not it had been paid.¹⁰² This accusation called into question the integrity of Sydney Robjohns, head Ontario Emigration Agent in London, who was responsible for administering the bonus money. Robjohns vociferously denied the accusations made by Lambertsen and produced a trail of correspondence to illustrate how the transactions had been conducted. A letter from James and Alexander Allan, dated 30 September 1875, explained that some of the passengers believed the Ontario bonus was to go to directly to them: “they fancied that the exceedingly small sum in money which we received from themselves should have sufficed for their passage money. This we learned incidentally long after their conveyance.”¹⁰³

Moreover, the Allans claimed that the amount of money they received from all parties was not sufficient for them to have made the journey profitable. They told Robjohns that they had only sent the *St. Patrick* to Iceland in order to prevent Lambertsen from being discredited.¹⁰⁴ In a time of reduced numbers of transatlantic passengers, the Allan Line nonetheless was anxious to cultivate a largely untapped market. The Canadian officials for their part had subsidized the trip heavily, and wanted to be sure

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., RG 11-8-1, file 66, Robjohns to Spence, 6 October 1875.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 925, Spence to Byrne, 24 October 1874.

¹⁰² Ibid., RG 11-8-1, file 66A, Robjohns to Spence, 30 September 1875.

¹⁰³ Ibid., file 66E, J. & A. Allan to Robjohns, 30 Sept. 1875.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

that the party would not desert and go to the United States. The extraordinary arrangements led to the Icelanders aboard the *St. Patrick* being required to sign a declaration binding them to settle in Ontario. This declaration was included with the ship's manifest:

We the passengers by the S.S. *St. Patrick* to Quebec whose names are given in the foregoing list do hereby declare our intention of proceeding to the Dominion of Canada and settling there, such of us as are married, declaring for our wives and children who accompany us and in witness thereof we do affix our signatures to the same, having had explained to us in our own language the meaning of what we are signing.¹⁰⁵

Far from compelling Canadian officials to concede an 'Icelandic Covenant', guaranteeing their rights, the Icelanders were compelled to sign an understanding not to abscond.

Direct sailings from Iceland to North America would prove to be rare. Including the sailing of the *St. Patrick*, only three are known to have taken place between 1870 and 1914.¹⁰⁶ The common pattern throughout the emigration period was the same as that established by the 1873 group. Icelanders journeyed first to Scotland aboard either regularly-scheduled freight steamers or transports carrying Icelandic horses, sheep, and cattle. These transports would usually call at the ports of Leith or Granton, necessitating an overland journey to Glasgow.¹⁰⁷ The emigrants then proceeded by steamer to Quebec.

Once there were a sizeable number of Icelanders in Canada, they drew the friends, neighbours, and countrymen who followed. However, the establishment of the Scottish route in 1873-74 played an important role in directing the initial swells of mass migration to Canada rather than to the United States. James Cameron has shown how the

¹⁰⁵ NAC, RG 76, reel C-4529, 3 August 1874 to 6 July 1878; quoted in Donald E. Gislason, *The Icelanders of Kinmount: An Experiment in Settlement* (Toronto: Icelandic-Canadian Club of Toronto, 2000), 5.

¹⁰⁶ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Emigrant Fares and Emigration from Iceland to North America, 1874-1893," *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 28, 1 (1980), 57.

¹⁰⁷ Kjartansson, 57.

substantial volume of trade between the Clyde ports and Canada in the early nineteenth century consolidated a pattern of Scottish migration to Canada.¹⁰⁸ The establishment of trade between Scotland and Iceland allowed the Icelanders to join this segment of the Euro-Atlantic migration system, and to come into contact with agents from the Canadian and Ontario governments desirous of fostering Icelandic immigration to Canada. The important role played by government agents has disappeared from traditional narratives. The relative poverty of the Icelanders, exacerbated by long waits for ships to take them overseas, led them to be favourably disposed to the Canadian offers of passage, with the attendant subsidies. In the case of the *St. Patrick* the Icelanders were compelled to accept Canadian settlement as a precondition of their transport to North America.

Traces of the mythic stories of Lord Dufferin's invitation and the Icelandic Covenant can be found in the archival record. Dufferin clearly did use his influence to prompt Canadian immigration officials to act generously toward the Icelanders, but he issued no direct invitation. An agreement was signed between the *St. Patrick* passengers and the Canadian officials, but the power relationships implicit in that agreement suggest that the Icelanders were not the ones dictating the terms. The way the stories have developed, however, is suggestive of how Icelandic-Canadians have traditionally privileged their own position in defining their relationship with the host society.

¹⁰⁸ Cameron, 52.

CHAPTER 3

ONTARIO EXPERIMENTS

By spring in 1875 the Icelandic settlers in Kinmount, Ontario had definitely reached the conclusion that the area allotted to them was not suitable. In addition to the poor quality of the land there was the ever present desire of obtaining a sufficiently large district within which all the Icelandic immigrants could settle.¹

Mythic accounts of the first years of Icelandic migration to Canada have emphasized the desire of the immigrants to form an exclusive settlement where they would be able to preserve their language and national culture unhindered for all time.² According to this interpretation, the 1874 *St. Patrick* group were persuaded to abandon their plans of proceeding to the United States by a Canadian government willing to accede to their special demands. The immigrants initially settled in Ontario but had little success. Icelandic settlements at Rosseau in the Muskoka district, and Kinmount in Victoria County, were unsuited for an exclusive settlement, and the Icelanders suffered many privations. Some of the Kinmount group splintered off and formed a settlement in the wilds of Mooseland Heights, Halifax County, Nova Scotia, but this unsatisfactory location was abandoned by 1881. The unsuitability of Ontario as a site for an Icelandic colony led the Icelanders to turn their attention to the Canadian Northwest.

Academic historians in Iceland largely have accepted this traditional interpretation. Helgi Skúli Kjartansson has argued that the Icelanders wanted to bypass a period of wage earning in the American labour market in favour of establishing

¹ Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Ottawa: National Printers, 1967), 108.

² For an early example, see Rögnvaldur Pétursson, "Þjóðræknissamtök meðal Íslendinga í Vesturheimi." *Tímarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, 1 (1919): 98-128.

themselves immediately as independent settler-farmers.³ Jónas Þór has conceptualized the first years of settlement as a dialectical struggle between those willing to assimilate to North American norms, and those clinging to a dream of an exclusive Icelandic colony.⁴

A closer examination of the Icelandic settlements in Ontario reveals a much more complex story. The strategies employed by the early migrants to cope with life in an unfamiliar cultural and economic environment do not lend themselves to easy classification in the dialectal categories of cultural retention and assimilation. Migration historians have rejected assimilation, implying an unconditional acceptance of the values and norms of the host society, as a poor conceptual tool. *Acculturation*, defined as a process by which migrants comes to terms with a new culture, has been used by Dirk Hoerder to help understand the migration experience. “[Acculturation] implies a gradual withering of the old roots while sinking new ones at the same time, a process that often takes place unconsciously.”⁵ All migrants undergo some form of acculturation out of pure necessity. Migrants must confront the economic, social, and political realities of the receiving society in order to survive in their new environment.

Gaining a better understanding of how the early Icelandic migrants dealt with their new circumstances necessitates a study both of the migrants and the receiving society. Especially it necessitates a thorough exploration of federal and provincial records that have been neglected in traditional accounts. The Ontario and Dominion governments recruited the Icelanders to meet demands in the Canadian labour market for

³ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, “The Onset of Emigration from Iceland,” *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 9, 1-2 (1977), 90.

⁴ Jonas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: the First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 4-5.

⁵ Dirk Hoerder, “From Migrants to Ethnics: Acculturation in a Societal Framework,” in *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives*, Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, eds. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 212.

domestic servants, farm labourers, and railway navvies. Ontario immigration officials erroneously believed that Icelanders were well suited to the task of developing agricultural resources on the province's rough-hewn frontier. Despite serious setbacks, the Icelanders responded to a number of the different economic opportunities open to them. That many of them wanted to maintain their old world social networks by living in close quarters with family, friends, neighbours, and fellow countrymen is by no means remarkable nor is it compelling evidence that the majority fostered a nationalistic desire to found an exclusive Icelandic colony. Maintaining old world connections was part of an overall survival strategy for coping with their new world circumstances that also included some measure of acculturation to the social and economic norms of the host society.

The belief that Icelanders would make excellent settlers and workers for Canada was not based on any previous example of a successful Icelandic settlement in North America, or a thorough knowledge of the economy and society of Iceland. Canadian officials and agents took for granted that the Icelanders were racially and culturally similar to other Scandinavians, particularly the Norwegians, who had proved to be effective colonizers in the U.S. Midwest. Their desirability also stemmed from the fact that they came from a cold northern climate believed to be similar to that of Canada. In December 1874, Dominion agent Hans Mattson stated: "They are a hardy, frugal, industrious race—the oldest type of Scandinavians—well inured to a northerly climate, are excellent herdsmen and fishermen."⁶ What other information Canadian decision makers had about Iceland would have been limited to Victorian travelogues, such as Lord

⁶ "Annual Report of Mr. H. Mattson, Special Immigration Agent in Scandinavia," *Canada, Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 31, p. 134.

Dufferin's *Letters from High Latitudes*, which contained favourable accounts of the Icelandic people. John Lowe referred to Dufferin's book in a letter authorizing Agent General William Dixon to pay Allan line agent Guðmundur Lambertsen a commission on every Icelander sent to Canada.⁷

Most of the migrant Icelanders did indeed fit the Canadian officials' definition of 'desirable settlers.' Overseas emigration agents were commissioned to promote the emigration of three specific classes: farmers with capital, agricultural labourers, and female domestic servants.⁸ Although no complete information is available on the occupations of the emigrants, what is available suggests that most came from these three categories. According to Jónius H. Kristinnsson's emigration register *Vesturfaraskrá*, six of the sixteen heads of families among the 1873 group were farmers, while the others were described as either farmer's sons, labourers, or *húsmenn* (lodgers on farms). Most of the twenty-two single men in the group were listed as labourers, and almost all of the nineteen single women were recorded as domestics.⁹ A scan of the occupations of the *St. Patrick* Icelanders in 1874 yields similar results. Of the working age adults, sixty-three men were defined as farmers, labourers, workers, or farmer's sons, and twenty-three women were listed as either domestics or maids.¹⁰

⁷ National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Records of the Department of Agriculture, RG 17 A 18, vol. 1665, p. 93, John Lowe to William Dixon, 18 September 1873.

⁸ Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration Policy, 1540-1997* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), 48.

⁹ Jónius H. Kristinnsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of the Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983), 13, 176, 219, 223-27, 235, 257, 259-61, 283-285, 297-299, 310-321, 353.

¹⁰ Donald E. Gislason, *The Icelanders of Kinmount: An Experiment in Settlement* (Toronto: Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto, 2000), 34-43. Gislason's information is drawn from both Kristinnsson and NAC, Records of the Department of Immigration, RG 76, Quebec Passenger Lists, 1865-1921, reel C-4529, 3 August 1874 to 6 July 1878.

The successful recruitment of 'desirable' emigrants from Iceland was by no means representative of the overall fortunes of Canadian immigration policy in the 1870s. The Canadian government's promotional efforts in Great Britain and on the continent were constantly frustrated by competition from other recruiting countries. In spite of generous assisted passage schemes and other enticements, Canada frequently lost out to Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, and its most significant competitor, the United States, in attracting the desired numbers and types of emigrants.¹¹ When migrants did choose Canada, they frequently encountered agents from one or more of the provinces desirous of obtaining emigrants to meet their specific demands for labour.

The efforts of Dominion Agent Hans Mattson and Ontario agents Alexander Begg and Peter Byrne helped bring the 1873 and 1874 groups to Canada. That agents representing both levels of government were involved in recruiting the Icelanders was by no means uncommon for Canadian emigration promotion in the 1870s. It was the result of the stipulation in the British North America Act (1867) that the federal and provincial governments were to have concurrent jurisdiction in immigration matters.¹² An 1868 memorandum from the Province of Quebec explained why this arrangement was necessary: "...as each province must be held to know best its own want and the comparative advantages which it can offer to immigrants, it is highly important that each should have its own agent for this service."¹³ A Dominion-provincial conference on immigration in 1868 resulted in the drafting of the Emigration Act of 1869. Under this

¹¹ Norman Macdonald, *Canada Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 116-117.

¹² Canada, "British North America Act, 1867 - Enactment no. 1, Sub-Section 95," *Department of Justice Canada/Ministère de la Justice Canada*, website (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2002, accessed 11 March 2002); available on: <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/loireg/rapport/en/p111-3.html>.

¹³ Quoted in H. Gordon Skilling, *Canadian Representation Abroad: From Agency to Embassy* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945), 12.

legislation, the Dominion government was responsible for all overseas agencies in Great Britain and the Continent as well as domestic agencies charged with the reception of newly-arrived immigrants. The provinces performed duties related to the settlement of their own unoccupied lands, and they were responsible for the maintenance of immigrants until employment could be found for them. Provincial authorities also reserved the right to reject immigrants they deemed to be undesirable.¹⁴ The provinces were free to appoint their own overseas agents provided they were accredited by the federal government. Dominion agents were required to keep in close contact with provincial immigration authorities, and to distribute provincial emigration literature provided to them.¹⁵

Of all the provinces, Ontario was the most active in sending out its own overseas agents. In 1872 Commissioner of Agriculture and Public Works Archibald McKellar created a network of Ontario agents largely analogous to that of the Dominion Government. This was facilitated by a grant of \$80,000 from the legislature to be spent on the promotion of immigration to the province.¹⁶ McKellar first authorized the printing of a large number of maps, pamphlets, and posters to be provided to Dominion emigration agents in Europe.¹⁷ He then hired a small contingent of overseas emigration commissioners and agents. A chief commissioner with an assistant was appointed for England, and two agents were appointed for Ireland—one for the north and another for the south. Alexander Begg was named Chief Commissioner for Scotland, assisted in his duties by Peter Byrne. Two agents were stationed in Germany, two in Norway, and one

¹⁴ Macdonald, 90.

¹⁵ Skilling, 12.

¹⁶ "Report of the Commissioner for Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1872-73, no. 12, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

in Sweden. No salary was provided to the three agents sent to the Scandinavian Kingdoms until such time as they should be successful in bringing out a party of emigrants.¹⁸ By the end of 1873, the cost of employing overseas agents had swelled the budget of the Immigration Branch substantially. This amount was part of a phenomenal increase of \$101,500.41 over the previous year.¹⁹

It was hoped that these added expenditures would redress the consistent failure of immigration to meet Ontario's demand for agricultural labourers and female domestic servants.²⁰ In his report for 1873, McKellar stated that through the efforts of his commissioners and agents working at home and abroad, a total of 39,184 people had immigrated to Ontario in that year, a figure representing an increase of 11,055 over the previous reporting period.²¹ McKellar was quick to point out that this result was achieved despite serious obstacles in attracting immigrants. These impediments included improved economic conditions in Europe, competition from other countries, and the hostility of foreign governments to the activities of emigration agents.²² Although McKellar did not make mention of it in his report, the commercial depression that set in following the New York bank crash of 1873 also would have been part of the reason for the agents' difficulties in recruiting emigrants.²³ The situation became worse the

¹⁸ Ibid., no. 18, p. 2-3.

¹⁹ "Report of the Commissioner for Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1874, no. 5, p. vi.

²⁰ Skilling, 2.

²¹ "Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1874, no. 5, p. v.

²² Ibid.

²³ Macdonald, 112.

following year when the full effects of the depression had become apparent. The number of immigrants settling in Ontario decreased from 39,184 to 25,444.²⁴

When Edward Jenkins took over from Dixon as Dominion Agent General in 1874, he discovered that Dominion and provincial agents were competing for the small numbers of emigrants available:

I had frequent occasion during the season to notice the injurious effects upon the interests of Canadian immigration of the collateral employment of agents of the Dominion and Provincial governments. In some locations where agents were so duplicated, their rivalry interfered with the smooth transaction of business.²⁵

Rather than serving to meet the special needs of each province, the system of concurrent jurisdiction more often than not resulted in the duplication of officials and wasted effort. Jenkins reviewed the work that had been done by Dixon and his network of agents and recommended sweeping changes to how Canada's overseas emigration agencies were operated. He advocated tighter centralized control over the activities of agents whom he believed were not functioning efficiently.²⁶

At roughly the same time as Jenkins was attempting to reorganize the Dominion agencies, Provincial Treasurer Adam Crooks took over responsibility for Ontario's Immigration Branch, separating it from the Agriculture portfolio and constituting it as a separate Department, in order to curb the run-away expenditures associated with immigration promotion. Crooks denounced the agents' activities in Europe as unnecessarily costly and chronically inefficient. In his first report, he stated that he had submitted a proposal to the Dominion Minister of Agriculture in October 1874, outlining

²⁴ "Report of the Immigration Department of the Province of Ontario for the year 1874," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 3, p. vi.

²⁵ "Report of the Minister of Agriculture," *Canada, Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 40, p. 73-74.

²⁶ Skilling, 8.

how the policies of the provinces and the federal government might be harmonized.²⁷ A Dominion-provincial conference in November 1874 decided that all provincial agencies abroad were to be closed and all provincial agents would be withdrawn. The provinces could, if they wished, appoint a special provincial sub-agent who would be subject to the authority of the head Dominion agent in London. The Dominion government was to take all measures to promote and facilitate immigration to Canada to meet the needs of the provinces. However, it was made clear that the Dominion government would make its priority the promotion of Manitoba and the Northwest.²⁸ Crooks was very happy with the settlement. He recorded in his report that the new system “should result in increased efficiency and economy.”²⁹ In fact, Crooks had orchestrated the dismantling of the very system that had helped bring the Icelanders to Ontario in 1873 and 1874.

Crooks was correct, however, in viewing the concurrent jurisdiction as a field ripe for personal manoeuvring. Ontario agent Alexander Begg had wanted to claim a commission from the Dominion Government for the recruitment of the *Manitoban* Icelanders in 1873. Lowe, apparently unimpressed with Begg’s character, dismissed the idea out of hand, and privately expressed his concern to Dixon that outsiders would not be able to distinguish between agents of the two governments.³⁰ Lowe’s opinion of Begg’s character was based on reports that he had been taking a commission from the Allan Line on top of his salary from the Ontario government. These accusations caused Begg to fall out of favour with the Ontario authorities and ultimately led to his

²⁷ “Report of the Immigration Department of the Province of Ontario for the Year 1874,” *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 3, p. vii-viii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ “Report of the Immigration Department of the Province of Ontario for the Year 1874,” *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 3, p. ix.

³⁰ NAC, RG 17, A 18, vol. 1665, p. 93, Lowe to Dixon, 18 September 1873.

dismissal.³¹ Begg nonetheless persisted in his efforts to create a federal government position as Icelandic agent in 1874 and was once again rejected by Dominion officials.³²

Apart from the material aspirations of the agents themselves, competition between representatives of the two levels of Government was also based on different plans for the settlement of immigrants. In May 1873, Lowe wrote to Dixon stating: "facilities will be afforded to [the Icelanders] to reach the Dominion lands in the North west where free grants of 160 acres would be made to every head of a family or adult persons over 21 years of age. Their transport would be paid from Quebec to Manitoba..."³³ The Canadian government was at this time desperately trying to settle its newly acquired lands in the North-west. Under the Dominion Lands Act (1872), free grants of 160 acres of land were made to settlers over the age of 21, who paid a modest registration fee, lived on their quarter sections of land for three years, built permanent dwellings, and cultivated at least 30 acres.³⁴ The Dominion government had little initial success in this venture, and transporting large groups such as the Icelanders was seen as an effective alternative to individual settlement. When news of the impending Icelandic emigration first crossed Lowe's desk in April 1873, a similar plan had just been devised for the settlement of a group of Russian Mennonites in southeastern Manitoba.³⁵ Alexander Begg pre-empted Lowe's plans by directing the Icelanders to Ontario. He made arrangements for the group travelling on the *S.S. Manitoban* to be forwarded from Quebec to Toronto, and then north to the Muskoka district where employment and free grant lands were available.

³¹ Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), Records of the Department of Immigration, RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 144, Archibald McKellar to Alexander Begg, 27 October 1873.

³² NAC, RG 17, vol. 113, file 11062, Francis Adams to Lowe, 17 June 1874.

³³ *Ibid.*, A 1 2, vol. 1507, p. 20, Lowe to Dixon, 22 May 1873.

³⁴ Knowles, 51.

³⁵ Macdonald, 199.

In the late 1860s and during the 1870s, the lands east of Georgian Bay in the Muskoka and Haliburton districts were thought to be a vast untapped source of future wealth for the province of Ontario. The heavily forested regions had great potential as a lumbering area, and it was widely believed that important mineral resources and valuable agricultural land could be developed once the trees were cleared away.³⁶ Agriculture was the most significant economic endeavour in Ontario during the nineteenth century, and was believed to be a stable and permanent foundation upon which to develop the economy.³⁷ Prior to Confederation, Reform politicians had pressured for the northern frontier of the province to be opened for agricultural development. It was hoped that new settlements would provide an outlet for excess rural population that would otherwise leave Canada for the United States, and create a new area of settlement for immigrants.³⁸

In 1868, the Ontario government took an important step towards opening their new frontier by instituting the "Free Grant and Homestead Act" which provided for the free grant of 160-acre parcels of land in the unoccupied territories east of Georgian Bay. Settlers could secure the patent for their lands after a period of five years' residence on the property, the construction of a dwelling, and the clearing and cultivation of a total of fifteen acres.³⁹ During the 1870s, the Ontario government heavily promoted the 'Free Grant District'. Exploratory parties and potential settlers tabled many glowing reports detailing the unlimited fertility of the soil and the wholesomeness of the climate.⁴⁰

³⁶ Peter W. Sinclair, "The North and the North-west: Foresting and Agriculture," in Ian M. Drummond, ed., *Progress without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Studies Series, 1987), 89.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Florence B. Murray, ed., *Muskoka and Haliburton, 1615-1875: A Collection of Documents* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1963), lxxx.

³⁹ Sinclair, 85.

⁴⁰ A Swiss colony was established in the free grant district due, in part, to such favourable reports. See "Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration," *Ontario, Sessional*

However, as much of the free grant territories were located on the Precambrian Shield, these claims were heavily exaggerated, and there was ample evidence to suggest that perhaps the region was not exactly as advertised.⁴¹

Scandinavians were thought to be ideal settlers for the rough-hewn land of the free grant district. An 1869 report for the Ontario Immigration Branch argued that Norway offered fantastic potential as recruiting ground for settlers.⁴² In reporting on the arrivals at Quebec in 1872, G.T. Haigh, Ontario agent for the port of Quebec, stated that he had convinced 134 Scandinavians to stay in Canada, and that he expected a major emigration from Scandinavia in 1873.⁴³ In his report of the same year, Ontario Immigration Commissioner McKellar stated: "Measures have been taken to establish a Scandinavian settlement in the Free Grant District by setting aside a township exclusively for persons of that nationality [sic], and I anticipate emigration from those countries to Ontario during the ensuing spring."⁴⁴ Haigh and McKellar were mistaken about the number of Scandinavians who would arrive in 1873. L. Stafford, Dominion agent at Quebec recorded 6,447 Norwegians and Danes arriving in 1873, down 3,701 from the previous year.⁴⁵ However, a colony of Norwegians was that year established in the free grant district where they found work opening new roads while preparing to take land.⁴⁶

Papers, 1874, no. 5, p. 32; John Wallace Smith, "The Swiss Move to Almaguin," *Swiss-American Historical Society Review*, 27, 3 (1991), 12-18.

⁴¹ Murray, lxxxiv.

⁴² "Supplement to the Report of the Commissioner for Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1869, no. 45, p. 14.

⁴³ Report of the Commissioner for Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration, *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1873, No. 12, 26..

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁵ "Report of the Minister of Agriculture," *Canada, Sessional Papers*, 1874, no. 6, p. 2.

⁴⁶ "Report of the Commissioner for Agriculture and Public Works on Immigration," *Ontario, Sessional Papers*, 1874, no. 5, p. 73.

The building of roads and rail lines was key to the development of these territories. Settlers could work on construction crews to save money to begin farming.⁴⁷ Ontario officials probably intended for many of the *S.S. Manitoban* Icelanders to be employed in this line of work. In immigration literature, newly arrived immigrants were warned against trying to establish themselves on free grants without first spending some time earning wages and learning the customs of the country.⁴⁸ The Icelanders were to be employed for the winter in the neighbourhood of Rosseau in the Muskoka district. David Spence, Secretary of Ontario's Immigration Branch, wrote to Rosseau immigration agent S.G. Best with instructions on how to deal with the group. "You can provide for them till after Sunday and then get them to commence work as soon as possible. It is intended by the Government to use them well but at as little expense as possible."⁴⁹

On 27 August, the 115 Icelanders who agreed to stay in Ontario were separated from their forty-three countrymen bound for Wisconsin. Guðmundur Stefánsson, who was headed for Milwaukee, described the event in a letter to his sister Helga: "It all happened so quickly that we had no time to say goodbye and we were quite sad."⁵⁰ Begg had made arrangements for the Ontario group to be received in Toronto by J.A. Donaldson, Dominion immigration agent. They were fed and housed in the Toronto emigration sheds for two days prior to being sent north to Washago in the company of Mr. Bensen, the Danish interpreter who had travelled with them across the ocean aboard the *Manitoban*.⁵¹ Washago was the end of the railway line, so they continued the journey

⁴⁷ Murray, lxviii.

⁴⁸ Macdonald, 91.

⁴⁹ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 94, David Spence to S.G. Best, 30 August 1873.

⁵⁰ Viðar Hreinsson and Jón Karl Helgason eds., "The Voyage across the Atlantic in 1873, recorded by Guðmundur Stefánsson," trans. & notes by Stefán Karísson, *The Icelandic Emigration*, Available [Online]: <http://servefir.ruv.is/vesturfarar/e/FyrGudmund.html> [4 Oct. 2002].

⁵¹ AO, RG 11-3-0-4, Assisted Immigration Register, 1873-74.

by stagecoach to Gravenhurst, and then boarded a steamer that took them across Lake Muskoka and Lake Rosseau to their final destination, where they were received by Best on 30 August.⁵² In a letter home completed shortly after their arrival, Björn K. Skagfjörð reported that several men with means were planning on purchasing land in the vicinity of Rosseau.⁵³

Farmers unfamiliar with the methods of agriculture in Canada were encouraged to buy partially improved farms rather than starting out on uncleared sections of free grant land.⁵⁴ Three days after their arrival, Baldvin Helgason, Davíð Davíðsson, Anton Kristjánsson, and Jón Hjálmarsson went out to examine land north of Rosseau in the company of a government land agent. They were unimpressed with the Crown lands in this area, and instead turned their attention to land six miles east along the Rosseau River in Cardwell Township. The government agent probably had some hand in directing the men to this area; the land along the Rosseau River contained clay deposits that made it some of the best agricultural land in the region. S.G. Best himself owned land in the area.⁵⁵ The Icelanders were informed that a road was to be built through this district the following summer to connect it to Rosseau village. The construction of the road was to provide work for the Icelanders, and, once completed, would aid in communication with the village. Satisfied with these arrangements, Helgason and Davíðsson jointly purchased 200 acres of improved land and a house for \$150. These men were also able to

⁵² Ibid., Mss. Misc. Coll., 1963, #3, MU 2139, Icelandic Settlement, "History of the first Icelandic Settlement in Canada," by Mrs. George E. Foote.

⁵³ *Norðanfari*, 3 December 1873.

⁵⁴ Ted Currie, "From Steerage to Homestead: A History of Icelandic Immigration to Muskoka," (Bracebridge, ON, Muskoka Desktop Publishing, 1990), 3.

⁵⁵ W.E. Hamilton, *Guide book & Atlas of Muskoka and Parry Sound Districts* (Toronto : H. R. Page, 1879), 71.

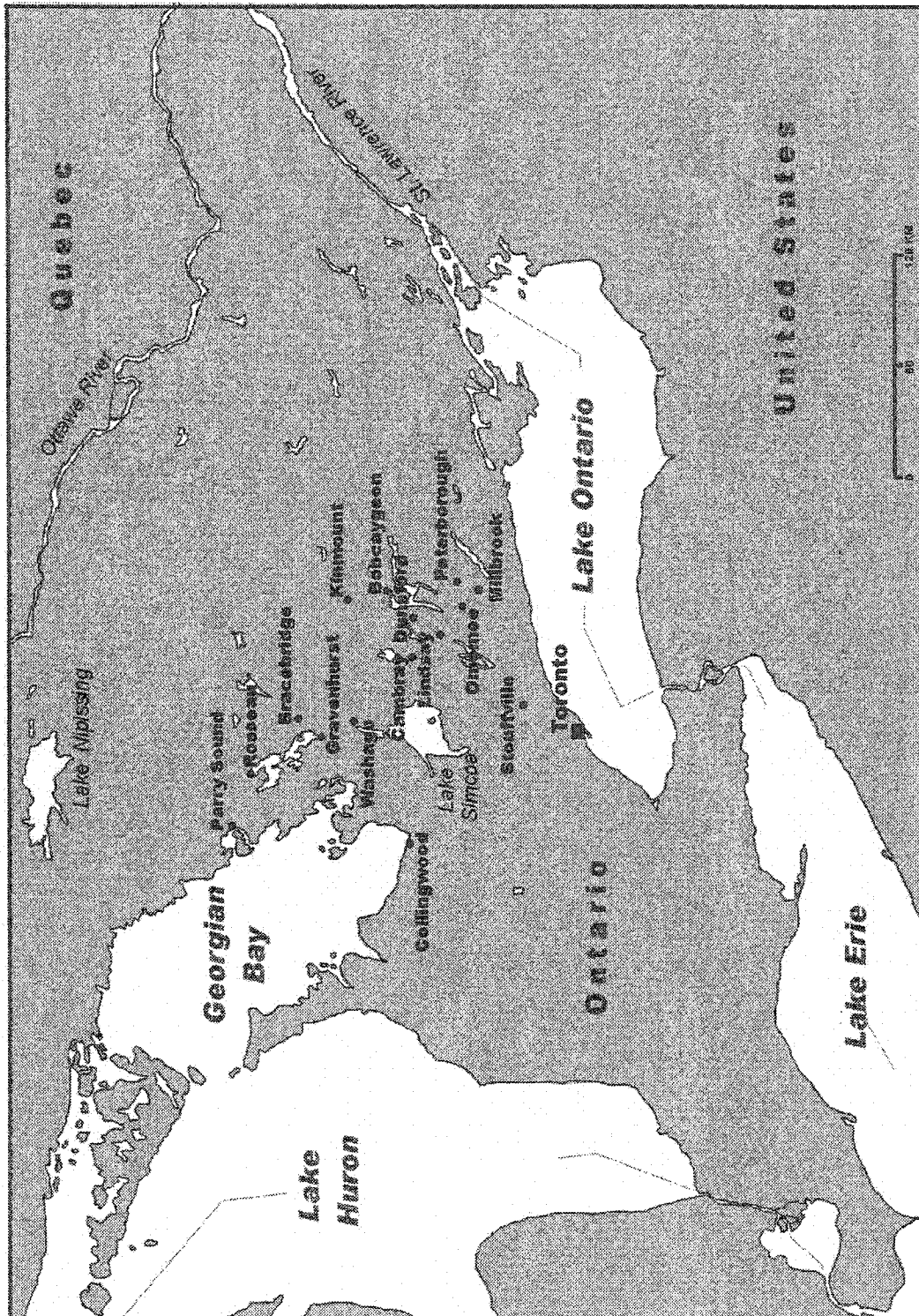


Fig. 3. Distribution of the Icelanders in Ontario, May 1875.

Source: AO, RG 11-8-1, file 4476, Sigtryggur Jónasson to David Spence, 29 May 1875.

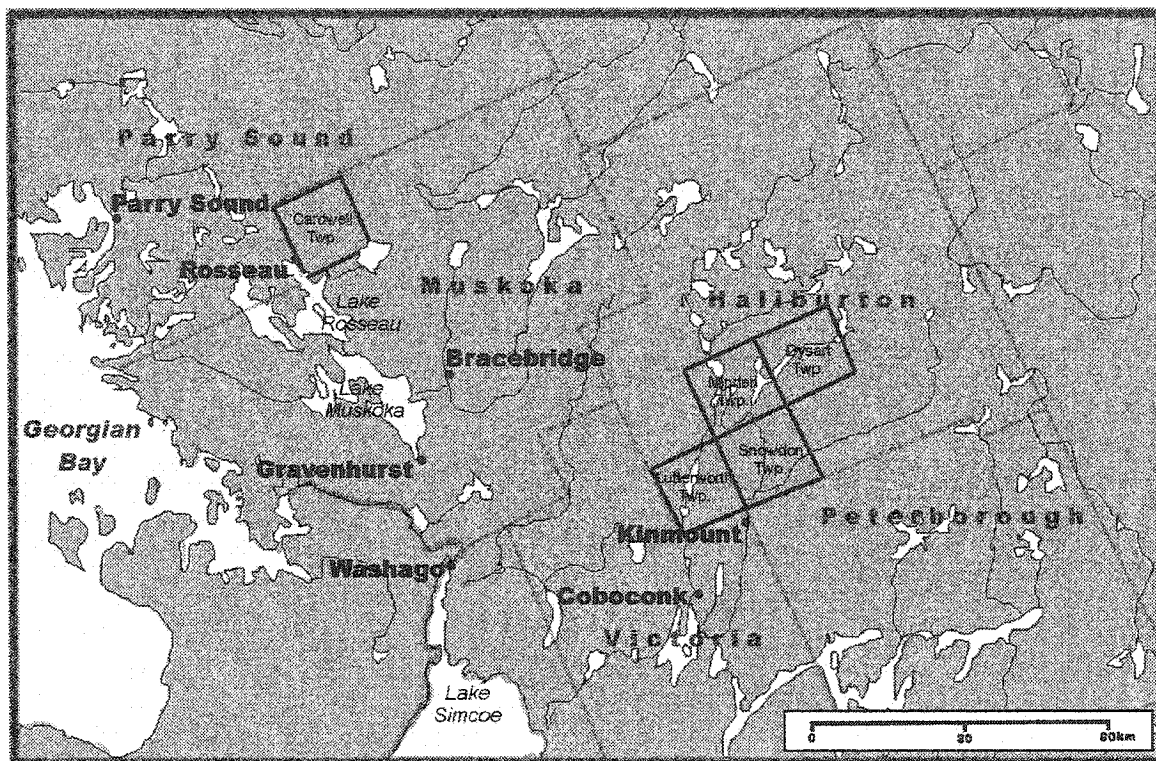


Fig. 4. Principal areas of Icelandic settlement in Ontario, 1873-75. Icelanders took farms in Cardwell, Lutterworth, and Snowdon Townships.

Source: Florence B. Murray, *Muskoka and Haliburton, 1615-1875: A Collection of Documents* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1963).

buy animals, and put up hay for the winter. Their families moved onto the farm in October. Others with less capital claimed adjacent free land; two single men, Jakob Líndal and Bjarni Snæbjörnsson, constructed a house for the winter on a lot beside Helgason and Davíðsson.⁵⁶

The government knew that colonizing was an expensive and difficult venture, and potential settlers needed money to sustain them before they could live off the produce of their own land. The Icelanders recognized this immediately, and sought out employment opportunities wherever they were to be had. Vigfús Sigurðsson wrote: "I took no land, as I had no money and thought only of finding work."⁵⁷ There were a number of different ventures in which the Icelandic migrants were employed. David Spence instructed Best to send two single men and two or three men with families north to Parry Sound.⁵⁸ Vigfús Sigurðsson and Jakob Sigurðsson Eyfjörð, both family men, were sent north along with four others to work at a sawmill in Parry Sound. The job was supposed to last six weeks, but instead terminated after only sixteen days.⁵⁹ Vigfús returned to Rosseau, but Jakob stayed and established himself in Parry Sound.⁶⁰

Many of the single women, including the adult daughters of some of the families, went into domestic service in Rosseau village and on more established farms. A letter from Friðrikka Baldvínisdóttir, the twenty-year-old daughter of Baldvin Helgason, to a female relative in Iceland provides a rare glimpse into the experience of Icelandic women in domestic service in Ontario:

⁵⁶ Thor, 64.

⁵⁷ *Norðanfari*, 9 May 1874. Translated in Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000), 109

⁵⁸ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 94, Spence to Best, 30 August 1873.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Mss. Misc. Coll., 1963, #3, MU 2139, Icelandic Settlement, "History of the first Icelandic Settlement in Canada," by Mrs. George E. Foote.

⁶⁰ He was still there in May 1874. see AO, RG 11-19, vol. 3, Refund Bonus paid to immigrants.

We are all at home now as we have not been able to find satisfactory placement (domestic work). Actually, I was hired for 11 weeks, receiving \$5.00 a month, but I worked very hard and I was too tired to eat my food. I rarely got more than three hours sleep a night. I was getting very thin and I felt that on account of my health I could not continue slaving like this.⁶¹

Friðrikka was the sole employee in a large guesthouse where twenty-three people lived permanently with up to forty boarders resident at a time. In spite of her difficult experiences, she emphasized that not all employers overworked their servants. She pointed out how Ingunn Jónatansdóttir, a woman from her home district of Húnavatnsýsla, had found a job in domestic service with which she was relatively content.⁶²

During the fall and winter of 1873-74, the adult men secured work on the colonization road extending from Rosseau village east into the area where Helgason and Davíðsson had purchased land. The Icelanders had food advanced to them on the understanding that it was to be deducted from their future earnings on road construction. Once this debt was cleared, they made fifty cents per day clearing the trees to make way for the road.⁶³ Helgason, Davíðsson, and the bachelors Jakob Lindal and Bjarni Snænbjörnsson cleared the sections of road in front of their lots during the long cold winter months with much difficulty.⁶⁴

Roadwork was practically the only available employment for the men, and they were generally disappointed with the difficulty of the labour and the poor remuneration. The scarcity of jobs in the Muskoka region disheartened many who felt that promises of

⁶¹ Letter dated by 10 January 1874 at Cardwell, Ontario. From Böðvar Guðmundsson, *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga I* (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 2001), 58-61. Translated by Gunnur Ísfeld.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ AO, Mss. Misc. Coll., 1963, #3, MU 2139, Icelandic Settlement, "History of the first Icelandic Settlement in Canada," by Mrs. George E. Foote.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

plentiful work at good wages made to them by Ontario officials had been grossly overstated. With little hope of finding work in Rosseau and environs, many of the Icelanders began to migrate to other places in Ontario and to the United States. Vigfús Sigurðsson wrote that when he returned to Rosseau from Parry Sound, he found that many of the original group had already dispersed. Vigfús reported that Ólafur Ólafsson from Espihóll in Eyjafjarðarsýsla, who had been one of the organizers of the 1873 migration, had left along with three other families and several individuals.⁶⁵

Apart from the two families that had settled on their farms east of Rosseau in Cardwell Township, those who remained were forced to spend a difficult winter in the emigration sheds. This included members of a second group containing fourteen people who had arrived in October.⁶⁶ In early November David Spence wrote to Best complaining about the high costs of assisting the Icelanders. He told Best that they should be denied all further assistance: “these foreigners must now shift for themselves.”⁶⁷ With official support cut off the Icelanders sought assistance from other avenues. Benedikt Jónsson tried to help his countrymen by advancing them loans from his own meagre savings. The group also received assistance from Páll Thorlaksson in the United States, who had taken up a collection among some Norwegian parishes in Wisconsin.⁶⁸

When the Icelanders aboard the *Manitoban* were recruited to settle in Ontario, they were told about the province’s practice of granting a refund bonus to emigrants who stayed in the province for a period of three months. The bonus of \$6 per adult, defined as

⁶⁵ *Norðanfari*, 9 May 1874. Translated in Arngrímsson, 110.

⁶⁶ AO, RG 11-3-0-4, Assisted Immigration register, 1873-74.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, RG11-11, vol. 2, p. 169, Spence to Best 3 November 1873.

⁶⁸ Thor, 64.

someone over the age of twelve, and \$3 for children was one of the key inducements used by Ontario agents to secure immigrants. In December, the Icelanders at Rosseau and environs agitated to have their bonus granted to them to help alleviate their distress during the winter. The Immigration Branch at first resisted, saying that they had received more assistance from the province in the form of free lodging and food than the sum total of their potential bonus money.⁶⁹ However, when local reeve James Ashdown reported news of suffering among the emigrants, the government changed its mind. Spence wrote to Best saying, "From letters received at this Department it seems that the Icelanders in your [area] are in a bad state. The Commissioner has decided to pay them the \$6 bonus."⁷⁰

At least seventy-two Icelanders from the 1873 *S.S. Manitoban* group, as well as nine from the *S.S. Scandinavian* group, are recorded in the bonus accounts register between January and May 1874.⁷¹ This register provides important clues about the Icelanders' migration and settlement patterns during their first winter in Canada. On the whole, families were most likely to stay at Rosseau and environs. Of the fifteen identifiable Icelandic families in the register, twelve are recorded as living at Rosseau, one at Parry Sound, and no address was given for the remaining two. Jón Hjálmarsson, Sigurður Jóhannesson and their families were listed beside Árni Friðriksson, Baldvin Baldvinsson, and Páll Jóhannesson, three single men who were resident in Toronto. A total of six single men, two single women, and three married, childless couples appear in

⁶⁹ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 225, Spence to J. & A. Allan, 1 December 1873. The Allan Line attempted to collect the Icelanders' bonus from the Ontario government on the grounds that they had loaned money to the emigrants.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Spence to Best, 19 December 1873.

⁷¹ Exact numbers are difficult to ascertain because many of the Icelandic names are recorded incorrectly. I have only counted those whose identity could be established without question. Ibid., RG 11-19, vol. 3, Refund Bonus paid to immigrants.

the register. Unfortunately, there is no address listed for many of them; two single men are listed with the Rosseau families, one in Gravenhurst, and another in Bracebridge.⁷² Twelve single men and thirteen single women remain unaccounted for; some sources say that many of the single women were working in Toronto in domestic service,⁷³ but little evidence about their activities has been preserved.

Historians have sometimes blamed the suffering of the Muskoka Icelanders on their unrealistic desire to found an exclusive Icelandic colony. Their experience is often unfavourably compared with that of their countrymen who followed Páll Thorlaksson to Wisconsin and found work as labourers on Norwegian farms.⁷⁴ The Muskoka Icelanders did suffer, but factors other than their alleged stubborn desire for isolation need to be considered in order to understand their choice. First, most of the families and individuals who formed the nucleus of the settlement in Cardwell Township were from Húnavatnsýsla district in Iceland.⁷⁵ They did not have the strong pull of families and close friends already in Wisconsin that drew others in the *Manitoban* group to the United States. Second, the Ontario government actively recruited them by promising employment and land. That they were settled in a group was by no means remarkable, and is poor evidence that they shared some larger dream of an exclusive colony. Sending groups of immigrants to areas where they could find both land and employment was a well-established practice of the Ontario government. It was used with many other groups, including newly-arrived Norwegians, as a way of developing the agricultural and

⁷² Ibid. Hjálmar Hjálmarsson, who had arrived with the second group, was living in Gravenhurst, and Jóhann Kr. Guðmundsson was at Bracebridge.

⁷³ Thor, 66.

⁷⁴ See George Houser, *Pioneer Icelandic Pastor: The Life of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society, 1990), 101.

⁷⁵ These included Baldvin Helgason, Jakob Líndal, and Bjarni Snæbjörnsson. See Kristinsson, 219, 224, 226.

resource frontier. That the promised employment did not materialize was not entirely the fault of the Ontario government; the downturn in the Canadian economy that disrupted the lumber industry on the forefront of settlement could not have been foreseen.

Immigration officials rendered aid to the suffering families in the form of free food and lodgings, work on road construction, and through the granting of the refund bonus.

The Icelandic migrants in Ontario willingly adapted to their new circumstances in a number of ways. Those who carved out a tiny cluster of contiguous farms in Cardwell Township learned new skills necessary for pioneering in the Canadian wilderness, and selected some of the most favourable land in the district that remains in use today. Helga, daughter of Cardwell pioneer Baldvin Helgason, recalled how English lessons the family took in Iceland helped them get a head start in their new surroundings. She fondly recalled how an Irish family named Case helped her mother and father learn many of the skills necessary for pioneering in the Canadian wilderness.⁷⁶

Not all the families and individual migrants were able to adapt to life in the Muskoka bush. When opportunities around Rosseau were insufficient, many left for the United States or elsewhere in Ontario. Once again, these movements were primarily based on kinship connections from Iceland. Ólafur Ólafsson from Espihóll had many friends among the people in Wisconsin, and as a result followed them south shortly after arriving in Rosseau. Friðjón Friðriksson and his wife Guðný Sigurðardóttir went to Milwaukee with their friend Ólafur and his family, but returned to Toronto in the fall of 1874 where his brother Árni had found a job.⁷⁷ Many among the cluster of young people in Toronto were from Eyjafjarðarsýsla district, while others were from adjacent districts

⁷⁶ AO, Mss. Misc. Coll., 1963, #3, MU 2139, Icelandic Settlement, "History of the first Icelandic Settlement in Canada," by Mrs. George E. Foote.

⁷⁷ Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985), 230-232.

in Suður-Pingeyjársýsla.⁷⁸ They readily recognized the need to adapt to life in the Ontario capital. Seventeen-year-old Baldvin Baldvinsson, soon to be known as Baldwin L. Baldwinson, worked as a shoemaker while attending night school to improve his English.⁷⁹

In the spring of 1874, Balvinsson's cousin Sigtryggur Jónasson, the first Icelander to settle in Canada, visited the group of Icelanders at Rosseau. He and several of the Rosseau group who had not yet selected land went on an expedition in the Muskoka and Parry Sound districts.⁸⁰ Shortly thereafter he wrote a letter to the editor of *Norðanfari* containing a detailed account of their travels, and an explanation of the procedure for securing a patent on a section of free grant land.⁸¹ He stated that while the party had found much land that was totally unfit for agriculture, many of the townships had substantial deposits of 'sandy loam' soil that would support the growth of many agricultural commodities. Jónasson was optimistic about the prospects of future Icelandic settlement in the region:

It is difficult to estimate how much land is suited to cultivation in these townships, but I feel it safe to say about seventy percent. On the whole we could say that the land is promising, and the many lakes, rivers and brooks, with crystal clear water, add much to its beauty, and I think Icelanders will find this land suits them better than the endless prairies, from which the scorching summer sun has dried up every drop of water.⁸²

Jónasson also pointed to the many different sources of employment in the region. Road construction offered steady work, and rail connections were soon to be built through the

⁷⁸ See Kristinnsson, 291, 342.

⁷⁹ Arngrimsson, 72.

⁸⁰ Sigtryggur Jónasson, *The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press, 1901), 6-7.

⁸¹ *Norðanfari*, 1 July 1874.

⁸² *Ibid.* Translated by Gunnur Ísfeld

district. He told readers that the Canadian Pacific Railway was bound to pass only sixty miles from Rosseau.⁸³ Saw mills also offered plenty of seasonal employment notwithstanding the recent downturn in their business due to the economic troubles in the United States. He told readers that opportunities in Ontario were many, but hard work was the vital ingredient necessary for success:

I am confident that those of my countrymen who desire to settle in Ontario will not regret it later. Personally I know many who arrived here to the woods a few years ago with nothing but an axe and strong arms, yet willing to use them, who are now well off although they had a wife and children to support, and they bless the day they settled in Canada. On the other hand, there are examples of men who arrived with some money, but were too lazy to work and did not shun alcohol, who have left with nothing and blame the country for it.⁸⁴

As Jónasson's letter was published in the 1 July 1874 issue of *Norðanfari* it would have been available to the emigrants waiting in Akureyri and Sauðarkrókur for a ship to take them to North America. Jónasson himself was well aware of the migration set to take place and conferred with S.G. Best at Rosseau on how the group might be brought to Ontario. Best informed David Spence, who in turn sent letters to Peter Byrne in Scotland, and Sydney Robjohns, head Ontario agent in London.⁸⁵ On 10 July Spence informed Premier Oliver Mowat, temporarily in charge of immigration matters during Provincial Treasurer Adam Crooks' absence, of the imminent arrival of 300 Icelanders at Halifax, and requested his permission to send Jónasson to meet the party and bring them to Ontario. Spence himself enthusiastically recommended the project: "The Icelanders

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 625, Spence to Sydney Robjohns, 31 May 1874.

are far superior to the average class of immigrants. They are frugal, energetic, self-reliant, and well-educated.”⁸⁶

Mowat quickly approved the plan and Spence wrote to Jónasson with detailed instructions. “Those who agree to settle in Ontario will receive a free pass from Quebec to Toronto where they will be provided with provisions and sent forth to localities where they can get work.”⁸⁷ The Dominion Deputy Minister of Agriculture, J.C. Taché, had informed Spence that the Icelanders were to be settled in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.⁸⁸ Spence urged H.A. Maclurinn, Ontario agent at Quebec, to do everything in his power to assist Jónasson in getting them to Ontario instead of settling in the Maritime Provinces.⁸⁹ As it turned out, Spence’s fears were unwarranted. Shortly thereafter, the Nova Scotia Provincial Secretary told Dominion Deputy Minister of Agriculture J.C. Taché that his province could not absorb an immigration of 300 Icelanders. The New Brunswick government agreed to accept the group only if the Dominion agreed to pay the costs of their reception and maintenance.⁹⁰

Sigtryggur Jónasson was not the only Icelander in Halifax nervously awaiting the arrival of his long-delayed countrymen. Jóhannes Arngrímsson (John Anderson) was there to act as translator and guide on the way to Milwaukee. When Norwegian-American Line agent Páll Magnússon had realized he was too ill to emigrate in 1874, he had written to Arngrímsson in Milwaukee and asked him to meet the Icelanders at

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 696, Spence to Oliver Mowat, 10 July 1874.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 697, Spence to Sigtryggur Jonasson, 23 July 1874.

⁸⁸ NAC, RG 17, vol. 115, file 11208, J.C. Taché to Spence 21 July 1874.

⁸⁹ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 725, Spence to H.A. Maclurinn, 23 July 1874.

⁹⁰ NAC, RG 17, vol. 115, file 11231, Robert Shives to Taché, 20 July 1874. Ibid., file 11284, W.B. Vail to Taché, 29 July 1874.

Halifax.⁹¹ Jónasson reported his rival's activities to Spence, who relayed the news to Premier Oliver Mowat: "there is another Icelander from the Western States waiting their arrival at Halifax with the intention of persuading them to go to that section."⁹² The Dominion and Nova Scotia officials at Halifax were not sure who Arngrímsson worked for. Nova Scotia official Samuel Archibald lent him money based on the belief that he was in some way working for the Dominion government.⁹³ When it was learned that the *S.S. St. Patrick* would not arrive at Halifax, Archibald loaned him more money to go to Quebec. Arngrímsson was barred from meeting the migrants at Quebec because Ontario officials there knew he was attempting to take the group to the United States.⁹⁴ He nonetheless followed them to Toronto, where he was able to visit them in the immigration sheds, and tried unsuccessfully to get a number of them to return with him to Halifax.⁹⁵

Sigtryggur Jónasson, as guide and interpreter for Ontario, had been instructed to bring the Icelanders by rail to Toronto, where they would be fed and housed in the immigration sheds prior to being sent off to their ultimate destinations. Many of the people in his charge arrived with intestinal disorders contracted during the long weeks spent waiting in cramped and insufficient housing. The food served at the immigration hall in Toronto exacerbated the acute diarrhoea suffered en route by many of the people,

⁹¹ AO, Pamph 1977, no. 116, Icelandic Immigration to Canada and Ontario [sic], 1874, Journal of Jón Rögnvaldsson, translated by V. Eylands.

⁹² Ibid., RG 11-11, vol. 2, p. 829, Spence to Mowat, 30 August 1874.

⁹³ NAC RG 17, vol. 119, file 11653, Samuel Archibald to the Hon. Letellier de St. Just, 25 September 1874.

⁹⁴ Ibid. AO, RG 11-12, Register of Letters, 1867-1874, R.M. Perse to Spence, 23 September 1874. This telegram, which unfortunately has been lost, was titled 'Icelanders-Milwaukee scout hovering around.' Much of the Incoming correspondence of the Ontario Immigration Branch/Department from 1873-1874 is missing. The names of correspondents, dates of incoming letters, and subjects can be derived from the letter register, and some of their contents can be gleaned from the responses in the Secretary's letterbooks.

⁹⁵ AO, Pamphlet 1977, no. 116, Icelandic Immigration to Canada and Ontario [sic], 1874, Journal of Jón Rögnvaldsson, translated by V. Eylands.

especially among the children. Jóhannes Sigurðsson and his wife Guðrún lost their one-year-old daughter Pálína and an infant born on the *St. Patrick* during their time in the immigration sheds.⁹⁶

Ontario always needed agricultural labourers during the harvest season, and Ontario immigration officials had intended to use the Icelanders for this purpose.⁹⁷ Their late arrival in September meant that this plan could not be carried out so other arrangements had to be made. Young single people with no dependents were the most in demand. Several of the women were placed into domestic service in Toronto, while a number of men found work digging ditches around the city.⁹⁸ Others travelled to Muskoka to be reunited with relatives and friends. A group of fourteen including twelve male adults, one female, and one male child went north to Bracebridge on 29 September. On 1 October seventeen single women were sent to Lindsay to be employed in domestic service.⁹⁹

Finding places for the approximately fifty-four families in the group was more problematic. Even if the Icelanders had arrived in time to work as agricultural labourers during the harvest season, farmers were unlikely to be willing to bear the cost of keeping a family for the duration of the winter. Ontario immigration agent D.D. Hay and Jónasson arranged for the families to be sent into the free grant district where they would earn wages of \$1.12 ½ per day on the construction of a railway passing through the small village of Kinmount on the northeastern edge of Victoria County.¹⁰⁰ Hay wrote a letter to

⁹⁶ Gislason, 8-9.

⁹⁷ *Norðanfari*, 12 January 1875.

⁹⁸ Archives of Manitoba (hereafter AM), New Iceland Collection, MG8 A, 6-7, Fridjon Fridriksson to Jon Bjarnason, 14 November, 1874.

⁹⁹ AO, RG 11-3-0-4, Assisted Immigration register, 1873-74.

¹⁰⁰ *Norðanfari*, 12 January 1875.

the editor of *The Globe* explaining the advantages of the arrangement for the Icelanders and for the development of the province's hinterland: "Active, effective, and successful colonization depends on pushing rail lines...into the heart of our Free Grant Territory."¹⁰¹

In Toronto, Hay and Jónasson had made the arrangements with George Laidlaw, President of the Victoria Railway. Laidlaw was an energetic and enthusiastic railway promoter who believed that building railways north from Toronto was essential for opening up new settlements, and for the growth and commercial prosperity of the Ontario capital. In 1867, he began lobbying for the creation of a narrow-gauge railway system that would bring the produce of the country to market at low rates. Wood needed to fuel the furnaces of the growing city could be sold by settlers for a much needed influx of cash.¹⁰²

Laidlaw's dreams for the proliferation of railway transport in the province were matched only by his enthusiasm for settling the lands on the edge of the Precambrian Shield. In 1872 Laidlaw secured the backing of Toronto businessmen for the construction of the Victoria Railway—a line extending north from Lindsay to the upper Ottawa Valley. In order to push the line all the way through to the Ottawa River, Laidlaw and his partners needed subsidies from the government of Ontario. In an open letter published in *The Globe*, Laidlaw outlined the economic advantages of the project, and described how the construction of the proposed line would aid in the colonization of back townships: "To secure the rapid completion of the proposed Railway, your Petitioners are willing to co-operate with the Government of the Province in assisting

¹⁰¹ *The Globe*, 12 Oct. 1874.

¹⁰² George Laidlaw, *Cheap Railways: A Letter to the People of Bruce and Gray Showing the Advantages, Practicability, and Cost of a Cheap Railway from Toronto Through These Counties, with an Appendix Addressed to the People of Ontario and Victoria* (Toronto: Globe Printing Company, 1867), 4, 16-17.

from 2,000 to 3,000 emigrants or others to go work upon the line of the Railway and make settlements upon the lands in its vicinity during and after its construction.”¹⁰³

Laidlaw believed that emigrants from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway were especially well suited for his project due to their industrious nature and willingness to be located in groups.¹⁰⁴ These emigrants were to be indentured labourers paid in both wages and grants of land secured after a period of service to the railway company. In March 1874 Laidlaw succeeded in getting a government railway subsidy of \$291.60 per mile for his project.¹⁰⁵

The Icelanders who were to be his navy-colonists were sent to Kinmount in two parties, on 9 and 12 October. They travelled first by rail to Coboconk, and then made a fourteen-mile overland journey by foot and horse-drawn cart to Kinmount where they were housed in four poorly-constructed log shanties on a river terrace just outside of town. These accommodations proved too small for their numbers. The sickness that had plagued them for so long continued unabated under these conditions with especially grievous effects on the children. At least sixteen children and a seventeen-year-old girl died after only three weeks.¹⁰⁶ Símon Símonarson later recalled this time of misery: “Most bitter of all, for me, it was to see my little Guðrún suffering intensely and to not be unable to ease her suffering. She kept nothing down...About nine days from the time Guðrún became ill, God took her to himself, in his merciful embrace.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ *The Globe*, 11 February 1874.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 March 1874.

¹⁰⁶ Gislason, 14.

¹⁰⁷ “Icelandic Pioneers of 1874, From the Reminiscences of Simon Simonson,” trans. Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic Canadian*, 5, 2 (Winter 1946), 41.

The death and sickness in the Kinmount shanties led to a general malaise among the men engaged in Railway construction. Many showed up for work irregularly due to illness. The Ontario government was made aware of the situation, and dispatched Dr. J. Fidler to tend to the immigrants. Fidler believed that the chronic diarrhoea suffered by the people since leaving Iceland had become contagious due to poor ventilation and overcrowding. He urged the government to appoint someone to tend to the sick, administer proper medicine, and make sure that sanitation rules were followed.¹⁰⁸ Hay and Laidlaw also went to the settlement to ascertain the condition of the Icelanders. They found that of the ninety men in the settlement, only fifty were at work, and that the Icelanders “were neglecting the ordinary means of preserving health.”¹⁰⁹ Both men addressed an assembly of the settlers, with Jónasson translating.

Hay tried to reassure the immigrants that their situation would soon improve. He encouraged them to take advantage of the opportunity provided by railway employment. A government land agent was scheduled to visit soon to help them select land, and they would need savings from railway work to tackle the difficult business of pioneering. He assured them that the government would help alleviate their distress by building two more shanties and by providing the services of a doctor to care for the sick. Hay also addressed the settlers’ concerns about the children’s education by informing them that a school would soon be opened. Laidlaw was less conciliatory. He told the Icelanders that the special treatment given to them by the government was unprecedented. They were given comfortable shanties to live in and wages usually only given to experienced navvies. He expressed his displeasure that so many able-bodied men were hanging

¹⁰⁸ *The Canadian Post* (Lindsay), 2 November 1874.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

around when there was work to be done. He quickly disabused them of any notions that they would be paid regardless of the amount of work they did—it was only through industriousness and sobriety that they would be successful.¹¹⁰

A correspondent for *The Canadian Post* of Lindsay made light of Laidlaw's fevered exhortations to the Icelanders:

It occurred to us that a great preacher was spoiled when Mr. Laidlaw devoted his attention to the railways. It would have amused a Toronto audience to hear the evocative and sententious manner in which the law and testimony in respect to labour, sobriety, and social duties, were expounded and enforced.¹¹¹

The construction of more shanties and the arrival of Dr. Charles Curry from Minden helped alleviate the problems, and work continued on the Victoria Railway.¹¹² In the late fall Jónasson opened a store in partnership with a Canadian in order to supply the Icelanders. When he and his partner went their separate ways, Jónasson brought his friend Friðjón Friðriksson out from Toronto to operate the store.¹¹³ In March Jónasson began teaching English to the children and adults in the new school that had been secured through the lobbying efforts of Rev. F. Burt of Minden.¹¹⁴

At the same time as these tangible improvements were taking place, the employment situation worsened. On 22 January Jónasson reported to Spence that twenty-five men, most of whom had families, were out of work and desperately in need of provisions.¹¹⁵ The roots of this problem were, according to Jónasson, the general lack of employment opportunities in the province. He wrote a letter to *Norðanfari* stating that the Railway company had used the

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 20 November 1874.

¹¹² Ibid., 11 December, 1874.

¹¹³ AM, New Iceland Collection, MG 8, A 6-7, Friðriksson to Bjarnason, 15 June 1875.

¹¹⁴ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 3, p. 253, Spence to Frederick Burt, 13 March 1875.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., RG 11-8-1, file 3862, Jónasson to Spence, 22 January 1875.

excess of labour to drive wages down to ninety cents per day.¹¹⁶ Jónasson allowed the unemployed men to go into debt at his store in order to keep their families from starving. He hoped that they would soon be called to work. Spence confronted Laidlaw, saying that the Icelanders had been sent to that location only because the company agreed to keep them employed throughout the winter, and that the company was duty bound to live up to its obligations.¹¹⁷

In fact, Laidlaw's difficulties with his Icelandic employees were symptomatic of larger problems affecting the entire project. The cost of clearing forest and blasting rock through the shield country had led to a significant cost overrun at a time of economic depression. Laidlaw hoped to use the Icelandic crisis to secure more assistance from the government, but was firmly rebuked by Ontario Treasurer and Acting Immigration Commissioner Adam Crooks. He told Laidlaw: "the provincial government does not assume to do more than transport immigrants to localities where they can obtain employment after which any further responsibility ceases."¹¹⁸ The message was clear—no further assistance would be provided.

As the winter progressed many of the Icelanders grew increasingly disillusioned with their situation. *The Canadian Post* reported that some Icelanders believed the actions of the government were part of a giant conspiracy to direct them into the backwoods where they could not get good land and thus would be forced to work on the railroad for low wages.¹¹⁹ Brynjólfur Brnyjólfsson, who acted as spokesperson for the disenchanted, wrote a letter of complaint to the Immigration Department. Spence responded that while he sympathized with

¹¹⁶ *Norðanfari*, 29 April 1875. Translated in Argrímsson, 115.

¹¹⁷ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 3, p.113, Spence to George Laidlaw, 30 January 1875.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, RG 11-13, vol. 1, Adam Crooks to Laidlaw, 1 February 1875.

¹¹⁹ *The Canadian Post*, 11 December, 1874.

their situation, the problems they were encountering were largely incidental to frontier life.¹²⁰

However, some of the Icelanders did feel that the government was acting in good faith.

Friðjón Friðriksson believed that his countrymen did not truly appreciate the efforts being made for them. He told his friend Pastor Jón Bjarnason that most of their grievances were rooted in unrealistic and foolish ideas about America as a land of unbounded opportunity.¹²¹

Friðriksson's reservations about his countrymen's wisdom aside, he did concede that unemployment was a grievous problem in their little community. The situation took a drastic turn for the worse when work on the Victoria Railway suddenly stopped on 15 March 1875. The men who had been retained by the company were suddenly unemployed, and their prospects looked grim. Spence wrote to Crooks stating that unless the government interceded the Icelanders would surely starve. He was well aware of the Acting Commissioner's stance on assisting immigrants once settled, but tried to convince him of the severity of the situation and the unfavourable results of inaction:

The Government is, in a sense, clear of responsibility on account of these people, but should some of them die of hunger, the voice of humanity would be apt to blame the government notwithstanding, and the press could ring the case, not only in this country but in Great Britain, and on the continent of Europe to the injury of emigration.¹²²

Crooks begrudgingly authorized Spence to provide temporary relief to the Icelanders at Kinmount in the form of \$120 for provisions advanced to Jónasson. By early April the amount Jónasson had been instructed to dispense in aid had grown to \$240. Spence told the young Icelfander that it might be necessary to break up the colony and send the men to various

¹²⁰ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 3, p. 86, Spence to B. Brynjólfsson, 16 January 1875.

¹²¹ AM, MG8, A 6-7, Friðriksson to Bjarnason, 15 June, 1875.

¹²² AO, RG11-11, vol. 3, p. 271, Spence to Crooks, 22 March 1875.

locations throughout the province.¹²³ Spence's promptings were unnecessary—many of the Icelanders were already on the move.

When work stopped on the railway many of the Icelandic families at Kinmount went south to Lindsay and Millbrook to find work. Símon Símonarsson and his wife Valdís Guðmundsdóttir were among them. Símon reported that they were happy to be reunited with many of the Icelandic girls who had gone into domestic service at Lindsay after their arrival. He found odd jobs working at a sawmill and as an agricultural labourer on a farm outside town. A week or two after their arrival, several families and some single men set out for Halifax. Símon reported that he, too, would have gone if he had had the money.¹²⁴

A move to Nova Scotia had been contemplated by some Icelanders since November 1874 when Jóhannes Argrímsson visited Kinmount in the guise of an interpreter for the Victoria Railway company. By this time, the connections Argrímsson had made with the Nova Scotia government in the summer of 1874 appear to have been formalized. He was acting as an agent for Nova Scotia, authorized to offer his countrymen 100 acres of partially-cleared land with a house already constructed on it. A delegation of five men left Kinmount in November to examine the offer.¹²⁵ Jón Rögnvaldsson recorded in his memoirs that all of the Icelanders at Lindsay wanted to go to Nova Scotia but did not have the necessary funds. Eventually a group of approximately thirty led by Brynjólfur Brynjólfsson earned enough money to make the trip.¹²⁶ Jón and his family were among those who went to Nova Scotia later in the summer after an extended period working in the neighbourhood of Millbrook.¹²⁷

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 299, Spence to Jónasson, 31 March 1875; *Ibid.*, p. 355, Spence to Jónasson, 15 April 1875.

¹²⁴ "Icelandic Pioneers of 1874," 42.

¹²⁵ AO, Pamph 1977, no. 116, *Icelandic Immigration to Canada and Ontario [sic]*, 1874, *Journal of Jón Rögnvaldsson*, translated by V. Eylands.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

Reports of a mass exodus of Icelanders to Nova Scotia appeared in the Ontario press at the end of March. *The Fenelon Falls Gazette* reported that their departure was not to be regretted as they were largely drunkards who lived together in frightfully unsanitary conditions.¹²⁸ Sigtryggur Jónasson vociferously denied the accusations made by the editor of the *Gazette* in a letter to the editor of *The Canadian Post*. Jónasson said that there were still thirty-five families resident at Kinmount who were beginning the process of settling on lands. He asserted that those who had gone to Nova Scotia had done so only because of the promise of partially improved lands, something the Icelanders in Ontario had long desired. For his part, Jónasson did not approve of the movement to Nova Scotia. In February he had written to the editor of *Norðanfari* reaffirming his faith in Ontario as a destination for emigrants:

Personally, I'm still of the opinion that Ontario has many advantages over all the other options as a site for an Icelandic colony, as, when all is said and done, the Icelanders here have prospered more than anywhere else in America, no matter what anyone else might say.¹²⁹

Other Icelanders at Kinmount were disparaging of their countrymen's decision to go to Nova Scotia and of their prospects for success. Friðjón Friðriksson caustically wrote: "Incidentally, because their letters [from Nova Scotia] include such an overwhelming amount of nonsense, it is difficult to know what is true in their writing."¹³⁰

David Spence read the newspaper reports of a mass exodus to Nova Scotia and asked Jónasson to verify whether or not the movement was taking place as reported.¹³¹ On 29 May, Jónasson replied with a detailed report on the location of the Icelanders who had come to

¹²⁸ Reprinted in *The Canadian Post*, 23 April 1875.

¹²⁹ *Norðanfari*, 29 April 1875. Translated in Arngrímsson, 116.

¹³⁰ AM, MG 8, A 6-7, Friðriksson to Bjarnason, 15 June, 1875.

¹³¹ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 3, p. 355, Spence to Jónasson, 15 April 1875.

Ontario in 1874, including those who had gone to Nova Scotia.¹³² He counted seven families and five single men, a total of thirty-eight people, who had left for Halifax, including the five men who went in November. Others who left Kinmount in mid-March and April were distributed at various places in Victoria and Peterborough counties (See Figure 3).

Table 1. Distribution of Icelanders in Ontario, May 1875.

	Families	Couples without children	Single or Widowed Women w/ children	Single Women	Single Men
Kinmount Shanties	20	3	-	-	4
Snowdon (free grants)	4	2	-	-	1
Lutterworth (free grants)	4	3	-	1	4
Rosseau	-	-	-	-	2
Washago	1	-	-	-	-
Collingwood	-	-	-	-	4
Cambray	-	-	-	-	6
Stouffville	-	-	-	2	-
Lindsay and countryside	1	2	2	15	1
Dunsford	1	-	-	-	-
Omeme	1	-	-	-	2
Millbrook and countryside	5	2	-	-	6
Peterborough and countryside	2	-	-	-	2
Toronto	-	-	1	10	-
Total in Ontario	310				
Deaths in Ontario	24				
Gone to Nova Scotia	38				
Unknown (Domestic Servants)	4				
TOTAL	352				

Source: AO, RG 11-8-1, file 4476, Sigtryggur Jónasson to David Spence, 29 May 1875.

¹³² Ibid., RG 11-8-1, file 4476, Jónasson to Spence, 29 May 1875.

Jónasson told *The Canadian Post* that those who had remained at Kinmount did so because they did not have the funds to travel elsewhere in search of work.¹³³ Skapti Arason, one of the four single men, wrote a letter home stating that many of the family men who went south had succeeded in getting employment on farms where they were to be paid 100 to 120 dollars per year.¹³⁴ Arason stayed at Kinmount with his brother Benedikt, sister Guðný and their families. His other sister Guðfinna was one of the ten single women employed in domestic service in Toronto. Arason reported that they would soon go out to choose land in the adjacent townships, although he did not know how they would begin homesteading without some employment to tide them over. He still held out hope that the Railway would resume work shortly.¹³⁵ During May, the Icelanders at Kinmount examined the townships of Snowdon and Lutterworth in the company of Crown Lands Agent William Hartle. Two men bought improved farms, and three others leased land, while more than twenty others accepted free grants.¹³⁶ Friðriksson told his friend Pastor Jón Bjarnason that the men who had accepted the free grants had no means to work their land that summer. They would have to leave their families behind and venture far afield in search of employment unless the railway began work soon.¹³⁷ Unfortunately, work on the Victoria Railway did not resume until March 1876, and the Icelanders were forced to seek out other employment opportunities.¹³⁸

By May 1875, the Icelanders were no longer highly-prized immigrants in the eyes of important members of the Ontario government. Acting Commissioner of Immigration Adam Crooks had approved of the special arrangements to bring the *St. Patrick* Icelanders to Ontario

¹³³ *The Canadian Post*, 6 April 1875.

¹³⁴ Skapti Arason to Tryggvi Gunnarsson, 10 May 1875 in Guðmundsson, 205. Translated by Donald E. Gislason and Guðrún Sigursteinsdóttir Girgis in *Lögberg-Heimskringla: The Icelandic Weekly*, 12 November 1999.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ AM, MG 8, A 6-7, Friðriksson to Bjarnason, 15 June, 1875.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Gislason, 22.

in fall 1874, but as the costs mounted he became increasingly frustrated. In January of 1875, Crooks wrote to Department of Agriculture Secretary John Lowe in Ottawa complaining that the province of Ontario was being compelled to pay for the sustenance of the Icelanders at Kinmount. Crooks told Lowe that the Ontario government should not have to pay for people who cannot work for themselves. "...This province is under no responsibility for the introduction of such a class of emigrants [sic] into Ontario."¹³⁹ Shortly thereafter Crooks flatly denied that the Ontario government had anything to do with introducing the Icelanders into his province and that the Dominion government must have been the cause of it. He maintained that the financial obligations of the Ontario government ended when immigrants arrived at a place where they could find employment.¹⁴⁰ Crooks made sure that all the agents in his service knew that Icelandic emigrants were no longer to be encouraged to come to Ontario. At the end of January 1875 he outlined his views on the Icelanders for Sydney Robjohns, Head Ontario Agent in London:

I have always contended that our province should not assume any parental or personal care of immigrants but that this Government fulfils its duties when it affords facilities for emigration, and some mischief is likely to arise through departure from this wholesome rule. In the case of the Icelanders who came out last Autumn they have been a considerable expense to the province and do not appear to be self-reliant or able to help themselves. I wish you to let our agents to [sic] clearly understand that this province will not accept the responsibility of caring for any emigrants of this class. Please also so inform the Agent General. I have written to Ottawa to the like effect.¹⁴¹

A greater understanding of the Canadian contexts for Icelandic settlement in Ontario, and the lives and strategies of the migrants themselves, reveals that the difficulties experienced by the Icelanders in Ontario were not simply the result of an unrealistic desire for

¹³⁹ NAC, RG 17, vol. 126, file 13297, Crooks to Lowe, 30 January 1875.

¹⁴⁰ AO, RG 11-13, vol. 1, Crooks to Laidlaw, 15 April 1875.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., Crooks to Robjohns, 30 January 1875.

isolation from the broader society in an exclusive Icelandic colony. They were recruited and settled according to the well-established policies of the Ontario government, which, due to adverse economic conditions, went sadly awry, forcing some of the immigrants to rely on various forms of government assistance. Because of his overarching desire to trim government expenditures, especially in the Immigration Department, Ontario Treasurer Adam Crooks railed against the Icelanders and branded them pauper immigrants no longer welcome in Ontario.

However, what Crooks and many historians in the Icelandic community have missed is that many of the Icelandic immigrants were actively engaged in precisely the types of work they had been recruited for. Single women worked in domestic service in Toronto, Lindsay, and other places. Ontario farmers hired Icelandic men to work as agricultural labourers, providing them with valuable experience in North American agricultural techniques. Those with sufficient funds began farming on their own, and many others had claimed land and begun the difficult business of pioneering on the Ontario frontier. Others, disappointed with Ontario, pulled up stakes and moved to Wisconsin or Nova Scotia. They were, under difficult circumstances, seizing a variety of economic opportunities in the host society while seeking to maintain their old world social networks. What is abundantly clear is that the Icelanders were not fixated on the dream of an exclusive Icelandic colony—a New Iceland. Yet this is the way that most histories of the Icelanders in Canada, ignoring Canadian sources that reveal the full extent of federal and provincial involvement, interpret their story.

CHAPTER 4

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW ICELAND

A suitable colony site was the great concern of the Icelandic people in Ontario and Michigan....above all, the people looked for assurance that the colony would be exclusively Icelandic.¹

The news was received by the settlers with enthusiasm. A large district by itself, on the shores of a lake teeming with fish! It appealed to them; at long last they would be able to establish a settlement for all the immigrating Icelanders.²

The establishment of the New Iceland settlement on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in October 1875 is one of the founding moments in the mythic narrative of the Icelanders in Canada. Icelandic ethnic historians have devoted considerable attention to the colony's genesis, often centring their discussion on belief that all the immigrants sought to form an exclusive Icelandic settlement isolated from the host society where they could preserve their language and culture for all time. This interpretation, articulated by early writers and accepted uncritically by more recent historians, sees the creation of New Iceland as the end of a process that began with the first discussions of emigration in Iceland, continued through the several abortive settlement attempts across the North American continent, and was finally resolved when the vanguard of the Icelandic settlers arriving at Willow Point just south of the present town site of Gimli, Manitoba on 21 October 1875.³

The purpose here is to take re-examine these events in order to better understand the motivations of all concerned.

¹ Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965), 21

² Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Ottawa: National Printers, 1967), 113.

³ For a recent example of this interpretation, see Jonas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 37

The basic outline of the mythic story of New Iceland's origins can easily be summarized.⁴ It is usually argued that while all the Icelanders agreed that an exclusive colony was desirable, the question of where it should be located was widely debated, and numerous proposals came to the fore. Rev. Páll Thorlaksson favoured rural Wisconsin, while Icelanders from Milwaukee examined possibilities in Nebraska and Iowa. A group led by the poet and journalist Jón Ólafsson explored Alaska with the assistance of the United States government.

Sigtryggur Jónasson, the leader of the Icelanders at Kinmount, Ontario, disapproved of the Alaska option, believing that Canada held the greatest prospect for a settlement. The traditional version recounts that the the settlers at Kinmount were unhappy with their situation there and looked to Manitoba as a possible solution. A Methodist lay preacher named John Taylor befriended the Icelanders and agreed to lobby the Dominion Government to have land set aside for the Icelanders in Manitoba. With financial support from the Canadian Government, he and Jónasson led an Icelandic deputation to Manitoba in the summer of 1875. No suitable land was available within the boundaries of the postage-stamp province, so they examined a tract to the north along the shores of Lake Winnipeg. Because of the good soil, abundant supply of timber in the forests and fish in the lake, the Icelandic deputation chose this area as the site for their colony, which they named *Nýja Ísland* (New Iceland). The delegates returned to Kinmount, where the immigrants rejoiced that the question of a colony site had finally been resolved.

⁴ The following is summarized from the sub-section 'The Search for a Colony Site' in Kristjanson, 21-27. Also see Lindal, 108-114; Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985), 19-25; Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland, Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000), 119-127; Thor 78-82.

The traditional version relates how Taylor and Jónasson went to Ottawa to secure funding for the move from Ontario to Manitoba, but met with stiff opposition from several cabinet ministers in the government of Alexander Mackenzie. However, Governor General Lord Dufferin is said to have interceded on the Icelanders' behalf and secured the needed funds. In late September 1875, most of the Ontario Icelanders and a few from Wisconsin made the long journey north west. They landed on the shores of Lake Winnipeg at Willow Point on 21 October 1875.

Some version of this mythic narrative is a staple part of almost every history of the Icelanders in North America. There are, however, three fundamental problems with this interpretation which need to be addressed. The first is that Icelandic migrants primarily made decisions on where to settle based on economic survival strategies and old world kinship ties rather than as part of a larger 'search' for a dreamed-of Icelandic colony. In traditional narratives, the lived experiences of individual migrants have become submerged into broad categories of acceptance or rejection of the 'New Iceland' ideal. In reality, the ideal proved to be a relatively weak attraction; in the fall of 1875 only 283 of the at least 813 people who migrated from Iceland between 1870 and 1875⁵ headed for the Canadian Northwest, and most of these were part of the group from Kinmount, Ontario.

The second problem is that primacy has been given to the competing visions of a small intellectual elite. Historians have commonly grouped the Icelandic immigrants according to differences of opinion among their intellectual and spiritual leaders. Four men in particular—Jón Ólafsson, Páll Thorlaksson, Jón Bjarnason, and Sigtryggur

⁵ Jónús H. Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of the Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983), xx.

Jónasson—were the primary mediators between the immigrants and the host society. Their opinions were published extensively and provide much of the primary source base used by historians. As a result their divergent motivations and philosophies for immigrant life are assumed to have been shared by those who depended on them to translate, or to voice concerns over insufficient housing and lack of employment.

The third problem is that the traditional interpretation does not sufficiently account for the fact that the founding of New Iceland was a reflection of the well-established policies of the Canadian government for settling its vast Northwest Territories. In sharp contrast, Icelandic ethnic writers have emphasized the colony's improbability. A closer examination of the sources reveals that 'the Icelandic Reserve', as the Dominion officials referred to it, was an initiative developed by the Department of Agriculture in response to the desperate state of the Kinmount Icelanders. In almost every respect, from transporting the settlers to the winter provisioning of the colony, the plan echoed the successful precedent of the Russian Mennonites who were settled in southeastern Manitoba in 1874. In recontextualizing the part of the founding narrative that idealizes the move to the Northwest, this chapter will explore in greater depth these three misrepresentations in order to tease new meaning out from what has been called 'the saga of the journey to New Iceland'.⁶

* * *

Everywhere in North America, immigrants of similar backgrounds clustered together to meet economic, intellectual and social needs.⁷ The first New Iceland settlers

⁶ This is the subtitle of Arngrímsson's book *Nýja Ísland*.

⁷ Dirk Hoerder, "From Migrants to Ethnic: Acculturation in a Societal Framework," in Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, eds., *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 244-245.

were motivated by a desire to better their economic fortunes in a rural farming community among family, friends, and neighbours who spoke the same language and observed the same customs and religious practices. This is different from a political desire to preserve a 1000-year-old culture and establish a settlement to unite all the Icelanders in North America. The group that landed at Willow Point was composed primarily of the two large parties of Icelanders who had come to Canada aboard the *S.S. Manitoban* and the *S.S. St. Patrick* in 1873 and 1874. Most came from Eyjafjarðarsýsla, Þingeyjarsýsla, and Skagafjarðarsýsla in northern Iceland, and families with children were most prominent among the group. The Kinmount settlers dominated the party, but there were also several representatives from the Rosseau settlement.⁸ Many of these people were relatives, friends, and neighbours from the same districts in Iceland.

Most had originally come to North America with a strong desire to establish farms of their own, but very few possessed sufficient capital to purchase an improved farm or immediately begin pioneering on free grants in Ontario. They needed to find waged labour in order to save enough money to return to the land. Icelandic men engaged in economic activities that Hoerder has identified as common to other agrarian migrants during the later nineteenth century. Some worked in factories and infrastructure construction, while others hired themselves out as agricultural labour. Those who did establish farms soon after arrival found seasonal waged labour in order to provide a vital injection of cash into the family economy.⁹ Other members of the family also contributed wages. Older daughters worked as domestic servants, and teenage sons worked as

⁸ An incomplete and flawed list of the names and places of origin for many of the adult men compiled twenty-five years later is the only record of New Iceland's first settlers. See Guðlaugur Magnússon, "Landnam Íslendinga í Nýja Íslandi," in *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* (1899), 30-32.

⁹ Hoerder, 213, 215.

agricultural labourers. The economic depression that began in 1873 disrupted the ability of many migrants to find work, let alone establish a farm from accumulated savings of the family. By the spring of 1875, most had dispersed from Kinmount looking for employment, and the Ontario government supported those who remained.¹⁰ This assistance was eventually cut off even though little employment was available, thus leaving the Kinmount Icelanders faced with starvation.¹¹ Families, friends, and neighbours were widely spread out in Ontario desperately trying to make ends meet.

Escaping dire poverty caused by underemployment and lack of opportunities was the primary motivating force behind the Icelandic migration from Ontario to the Northwest. The report prepared by the Icelandic deputation focussed solely on the economic advantages of the colony site, with no mention of the goal of cultural separation from the host society.¹² Sigurpáll Guðlaugsson wrote to his brother in Iceland that the main advantages of the proposed reserve were the large treeless plains, abundant fisheries, and the fact that it was only six miles from the route of the railway then under construction.¹³ He made no mention of the cultural or political goals often associated with the settlement, and stressed that its closeness to civilization, not its isolation from it, was one of its main benefits. Others among the group seem to have only reluctantly departed for the Northwest. Símon Símonarson believed that he could have stayed in Ontario had his employment prospects been better, “[We] were rather well situated in

¹⁰ Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), Records of the Department of Immigration, RG 11-13, vol. 1, p. 149, Adam Crooks to John Lowe, 12 April 1875.

¹¹ AO, RG 11-8-1, file 4425, Sigtryggur Jónasson to David Spence, 14 May 1875.

¹² National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Records of the Department of Agriculture, RG 17, vol. 140, file 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

¹³ Letter dated 1 September 1875 at Gravenhurst. Translated by Gunnur Ísfeld and published in *Lögberg-Heimskringla: The Icelandic Weekly*, 3 April 1988.

Lindsay. The people were good to us, and often helpful, but there was little work and the pay was low, and the future prospects poor.”¹⁴

The received version has downplayed the extent to which the Canadian Northwest was only one of many possible destinations for Icelandic migrants in 1875. Nova Scotia also exercised a considerable pull on those in Ontario and on immigrants arriving direct from Iceland. The first group of approximately thirty-nine people that left from Kinmount for Halifax in March were joined in July by several others from Ontario. Another group of eleven immigrants arrived in Halifax direct from Iceland in May 1875.¹⁵ The settlement site prepared for them lay between the villages of Caribou Gold Mines and Mooseland in the rugged interior of Nova Scotia. Each family was given 100 acres of land, one acre of which was cleared, and a log cabin. The men were provided with work building a road through the community for the first two summers.¹⁶

Nor was the establishment of ‘New Iceland’ greeted by the Icelanders elsewhere with the enthusiasm the traditional narrative might suggest. Until the arrival of the *S.S. St. Patrick* at Quebec in September 1874, the greatest concentration of Icelanders in North America was at Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thorstina Walters estimated that there were over 200 Icelanders in that city during the summer of 1874.¹⁷ Most of these people were unskilled workers who knew little English, and thus had great difficulty finding any kind of employment in a time of economic distress. Many hoped to found a rural Icelandic settlement that would allow them to escape urban poverty, but they largely

¹⁴ “Icelandic Pioneers of 1874, From the Reminiscences of Simon Simonson,” trans. Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic Canadian*, 5, 2 (Winter 1946), 43.

¹⁵ Guðbrandur Erlendsson, *Markland: Remembrance of the Years 1875-1881*. trans. Anna S. Bjornson (Halifax: Icelandic Memorial Society of Nova Scotia, 2000), 1.

¹⁶ Sigurður J. Jóhannesson, “Þáttur Íslendinga í Nýja Skotlandi,” *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson*, (1900), 49-50.

¹⁷ Thorstina Walters, *Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America* (Fargo, ND: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953), 45.

ignored the settlement in the Canadian Northwest. Only thirteen joined the trek to New Iceland in fall 1875; most of the Icelanders in the United States continued to live in small clusters in the Midwest. In addition to the Icelanders in Milwaukee there were settlements in Shawano County and Washington Island, Wisconsin, a sprinkling of settlers in Nebraska, and, commencing in July 1875, the beginnings of a prosperous settlement in Lyon County, Minnesota that later attracted many more people migrating from Wisconsin or direct from Iceland.¹⁸

During 1874 and 1875, these immigrants' intellectual and spiritual leaders hotly contested the question of where the Icelanders should settle. While the historiography has traditionally focussed too heavily on these men, the important role they played in mediating between their own people and the host society cannot be ignored. What we must emphasize, however, is that while they squabbled over principles and location, they were not all involved in the same search for an imagined New Iceland. Some were advocates of radically different strategies for immigrant life.

In the ethnic histories, the origins of the exclusive colony ideal are usually traced through the writings of poet and journalist Jón Ólafsson, Reverends Páll Thorlaksson and Jón Bjarnason, and Kinmount leader Sigtryggur Jónasson. All were multilingual and generally better educated than most of their fellow migrants. Their language skills alone gave them a level of access to the host society impossible for unilingual Icelandic speakers. This was not inconsequential for their relationship with their own group. Hoerder has argued that acculturation in the host society depends on education and economic status.¹⁹ Farmers, labourers, artisans, skilled workers, domestic servants and

¹⁸ Angantyr Arnason, 15.

¹⁹ Hoerder, 213.

urban professionals enter the receiving society at different levels. He states, "Journalists and priests, whose standing depended on the lower class members of their ethnic group, had to move slowly in the acculturation process so as to remain sufficiently close to their own people in order to hold on to their own economic base."²⁰ This feature of Hoerder's concept of acculturation is particularly useful for examining the disagreements between the early leaders of the Icelanders in North America. They held a range of opinions about acculturation that were related to their past experiences and future hopes for building a life here.

The dream of an exclusive self-isolating colony where all Icelandic migrants could live together apart from the host society is most clearly associated with the gifted poet and editor Jón Ólafsson. Ólafsson was an outspoken Icelandic nationalist, and some sources claim that his emigration was in fact a self-imposed exile following some particularly scathing criticisms of the Danish monarchy.²¹ After his arrival in the United States, Ólafsson made the acquaintance of several American scholars and professionals with a keen interest in the culture and history of Iceland.²² Marston Niles, a New York lawyer and former American naval officer, told Ólafsson it was possible the U.S. government would consider subsidizing Icelandic colonization in Alaska, and gave him a copy of a book titled *Alaska and Its Resources*.²³ During the summer of 1874, Ólafsson became convinced that Alaska offered the best prospect for a large Icelandic settlement.²⁴ In late June 1874 he held a meeting in Milwaukee with twenty-two Icelanders. They

²⁰ Ibid., 215-216.

²¹ Thor, 42.

²² These included Professor Willard Fiske, founder of the Icelandic Collection at Cornell University, and Professor R.B. Anderson of Wisconsin State University at Madison. See Walters, 212.

²³ Ibid., 48.

²⁴ The story of Ólafsson's Alaska project can only be sketched out briefly here. It has been treated in detail in Hjörtur Pálsson, *Alaskaför Jóns Ólafssonar 1874* (Reykjavík: Sögufelagið, 1975). For a good English summary, see Thor, 47-55.

decided that they would send a delegation of three men to Alaska to ascertain whether the favourable accounts they had read of the territory were accurate. Ólafsson told friends that his goal in this project was to establish a wholly Icelandic state within the American union, and predicted that the new settlement would drain old Iceland of its population and enable the rebirth of a free Icelandic nation. He projected that within three hundred years the colony would contain 100 million inhabitants and stretch from the Pacific Ocean to Hudson's Bay.²⁵

Rev. Páll Thorlaksson was completely opposed to Ólafsson's ideas, and wrote a reasoned critique of the Alaska project for the readers of the newspaper *Norðanfari* in Iceland.²⁶ Páll was the son of Þorlákur Gunnar Jónsson, one of the main proponents of emigration in Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla. He had the uncommon distinction of having received a formal education in Iceland, and arrived in the United States able to speak English. Because his family was of mixed Norwegian-Icelandic ancestry, he was also very comfortable with the Norwegian language, and this gave him an entrée into the Norwegian communities of Wisconsin.²⁷ Páll was impressed with the substantial material progress the Norwegians had made in little over thirty years. The Norwegian pastors he met urged him to continue his studies, and in the fall of 1872 he entered the Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri to be trained as a pastor in the Norwegian Lutheran Synod.

During his time as a student Páll wrote home to family and friends offering his opinions on settlement in the United States. He believed that some form of adaptation to

²⁵ Thor, 52, 54.

²⁶ For English translations, see George Houser, *Pioneer Icelandic Pastor: The Life of Reverend Paul Thorlakson* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society, 1990), 48-50

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

American cultural norms was a precondition for success in America, especially with regard to language and agricultural practices.²⁸ Páll did not, however, believe that Icelandic language and culture would or should disappear completely; he pointed to the success of the Norwegians in striking a balance between maintaining their old-world culture and becoming successful Americans. The Icelanders had no long-established community to help them take the first steps. Páll believed that the Norwegians could act as surrogates for the friendless Icelanders. His own family background supported what he considered the inherent logic of this relationship. Páll urged Icelanders to become farmhands on established Norwegian farms where they would learn the methods of agriculture in America prior to establishing an Icelandic settlement in Wisconsin. He believed that this course of action would assure their material progress, and thus help them establish the churches and newspapers that would preserve their language and culture in America. In September 1873, Páll found places with Norwegian farmers in Wisconsin for several of the families who arrived aboard the *S.S. Manitoban*. In July 1874, he arranged for them to purchase farms there at a price subsidized by the Norwegian Lutheran ministers.²⁹

During the winter of 1872-73, Páll actively encouraged his friend Reverend Jón Bjarnason to join him.³⁰ Bjarnason had graduated from the Reykjavík Theological Seminary in 1869, but had since experienced trouble finding a benefice. Bjarnason did not join Thorlaksson in studies at Concordia, but instead went to Decorah, Iowa, the theological centre of the Norwegian Synod, where he found that the doctrines of the

²⁸ Ibid., 27-28.

²⁹ Ibid., 28, 53.

³⁰ Ibid., 56-65 contains translations of many of these letters.

Norwegian Synod differed markedly from his own training in Iceland.³¹ Most distressing for him was the fact that the Norwegian Synod embraced a much more literal interpretation of the Bible. He confided to his mentor Helgi Hálfðanarson in Reykjavík that he could not see a future for himself within the Norwegian fold. He hoped one day to serve an Icelandic colony in America:

If enough of our countrymen come here so that a minister could make a living serving them, I shall most likely take that responsibility...It is my firm conviction that the Icelanders coming here should refrain from joining [the Norwegian Lutheran Synod]. Paul Thorlaksson's view on this subject is entirely different from mine. He is so thoroughly delighted with the Norwegian clerics' exaggerated emphasis on literal interpretation...I hope therefore that an Icelandic colony will soon become a reality. In my view it is the precondition for the survival of our people in every respect.³²

Páll Thorlaksson embraced a model of acculturation that Jón Bjarnason could not accept because it meant an abandonment of tenets of faith he believed were an integral part of Icelandic religion and culture. Bjarnason's hope to secure a place for himself as spiritual leader of the Icelanders in North America and to keep them from being subsumed into the fold of the Norwegian Synod drove a wedge between himself and his old friend Páll Thorlaksson.

When Bjarnason told Hálfðanarson he was hopeful that an Icelandic colony would be founded further west, he was referring not to Manitoba—that idea lay in the future—but to the efforts of the Milwaukee Icelanders to find suitable free grant land in Nebraska and Iowa. At a meeting in spring 1874 organized by Ólafur Ólafsson from Espihóll, the Milwaukee group decided to send an exploratory party west. Páll Thorlaksson advised

³¹ These differences later erupted into a heated controversy between Thorlaksson and Bjarnason. While beyond the scope of this study, they have been examined in: Jónas Þór, "A Religious Controversy Among the Icelandic Immigrants in North America, 1874-1880 (MA thesis: University of Manitoba, 1980).

³² Quoted in Houser, 71.

them against the idea, saying it was better to stay in Wisconsin, but the plan went ahead.³³

The Nebraska party reported back that except for lots owned by the railway, which were too expensive for people with little means, all the free land had been taken up, but a few Icelanders settled there anyway.³⁴

The conflicting visions of Thorlaksson, Ólafsson, and Bjarnason were readily apparent at a celebration to mark the thousandth anniversary of the settlement of Iceland on 2 August 1874 in Milwaukee.³⁵ This event began with a sermon by Bjarnason that emphasized the close link between the Icelandic Lutheran faith and the Icelandic nation. He warned them that the discarding of one surely meant the abandonment of the other:

We are not here to forget the duties to the only Nation the Lord has linked us with. Whoever forgets his motherland or pretends to have no obligations to preserve his ethnic background, which is of a religious nature for the simple reason that he now lives on foreign soil has also forgotten God. It is a short step quickly taken: you abandon your religion and then you also abandon your ethnic background.³⁶

In the program that followed, Jón Ólafsson, Ólafur Ólafsson from Espihóll, and Páll Thorlaksson each delivered an address. Jón offered a toast to Iceland that focused on the struggle for independence from Denmark. He received loud applause for urging his countrymen to support the continuation of the struggle until their native land was completely free of Danish influence. Ólafur Ólafsson delivered a toast to the Icelanders in America, encouraging them always to cooperate and live in mutual respect. Thorlaksson then delivered an address in Norwegian as a courtesy to those Norwegians in

³³ Thor, 44.

³⁴ Houser, 42.

³⁵ This celebration was to be modeled on the one being held in Iceland on the same day. On 2 August 1874, the King of Denmark granted Iceland its first constitution at a large gathering held at Þingvellir, the site of the ancient Icelandic parliament.

³⁶ Quoted in Thor, 49.

attendance. He thanked the Norwegian-Americans for their assistance to the immigrant Icelanders, and emphasized how his countrymen still had much to learn about life in the United States. Páll's address was to be the end of the program, but Bjarnason felt compelled to respond. He spoke in Icelandic, exhorting those in attendance not to ape the Norwegians who had been so quick to anglicize their names, and let their ancestral language slip into an English-Norwegian patois.³⁷ Despite the overall tenor of friendship at the celebration, the battle lines clearly had been drawn.

Jón Ólafsson used the occasion to circulate a petition he had drafted to the U.S. government in support of his Alaska project. In spite of the outpouring of nationalist sentiment, Ólafsson only managed to secure forty-three signatures from amongst the seventy present. Revealingly, neither Jón Bjarnason nor Páll Thorlaksson signed the petition. Ólafsson projected a mass migration that would make the Icelandic population of Alaska larger than that of Iceland itself: "there will be room for the whole population of Iceland many times over [in Alaska]; and Icelandic colonists and their descendants can get a living there secure under the flag of the United States."³⁸ He warned that if the U.S. Government did not act to assist the Icelanders, the Government of Canada would, resulting in the tide of Icelandic emigration being directed to that country.³⁹ After some discussion, the U.S. Government agreed to send a delegation to Alaska. The three men spent the fall examining Kodiak Island on the Aleutian Peninsula. Ólafsson was sufficiently pleased with the area that he travelled to Washington, but was disappointed

³⁷ Ibid., 50-51.

³⁸ Quoted in Walters, 211.

³⁹ Ibid.

by the poor response he received from American legislators. Ólafsson returned to Iceland shortly thereafter and seems to have dropped the plan completely.⁴⁰

The Alaska scheme was publicized in Canada in the fall of 1874 shortly after the arrival of the *St. Patrick* Icelanders. Some concerned Canadians bristled at the prospect of their southern neighbour securing the lion's share of the great projected Icelandic emigration and publicly questioned whether their government was doing enough to attract Icelanders to Canada.⁴¹ Ontario Immigration Secretary David Spence asked Sigtryggur Jónasson, leader of the Kinmount group, to provide an account of the Alaska project, and on 30 January 1875 Jónasson forwarded a translation of the report prepared by the Alaska exploratory party.⁴²

The fact that Sigtryggur had this report is indicative of the regular communication between the Icelanders in Canada and the United States. Sigtryggur would also have heard about the Alaska project first hand from Friðjón Friðriksson, his storekeeper and right-hand-man at Kinmount. Friðjón had been at the celebration in Milwaukee on 2 August 1874 and had been one of the forty-three signers of the petition to President U.S. Grant.⁴³ For his part, Sigtryggur shared Páll Thorlaksson's misgivings about Alaska as a home for Icelandic immigrants. In February, he wrote a letter to the editor of *Norðanfari* in Iceland stating:

I am of the opinion that Alaska is too far north to be much more fertile than old Iceland, and I can't help thinking that we would soon be isolated from the civilized world...as we were in the country we just left...Personally I am still of

⁴⁰ Archives of Manitoba (hereafter AM), New Iceland Collection, MG8 A6, 6-5, Letters of John Olafsson to Jon Bjarnason, 1873-75, Marston Niles to Jon Bjarnason, 10 May 1875.

⁴¹ See *The Globe*, 12 October 1874.

⁴² AO, RG 11-8-1, file 3892, Jónasson to Spence, 30 January 1875.

⁴³ Walters, 213.

the opinion that Ontario has many advantages over all other options as a site for an Icelandic colony.⁴⁴

Sigtryggur's views on settlement had much in common with those of Páll Thorlaksson. Later conflicts over the future of the New Iceland colony have resulted in these two men being portrayed as polar opposites in much Icelandic-Canadian historiography.⁴⁵ However, the vital role that both played as mediators between their countrymen and the host society during the early years tells a much different story. In their letters home to Iceland, Thorlaksson and Jónasson both offered practical advice that sought to strike a balance between integration into the host society and the maintenance of old world social and cultural connections.⁴⁶ Their pragmatic solutions for life in North America had little in common with the nationalistic idealism of Bjarnason and Ólafsson, and reflected the fact that they were actually involved in assisting immigrants by helping them find land and employment. Jónasson and Thorlaksson were nonetheless partisans of two different territories. Whereas Thorlaksson advocated a religious and economic partnership with well-established Norwegians in Wisconsin, Jónasson relied on his connections with the Ontario government to help him guide the *St. Patrick* Icelanders through their first weeks and months in Ontario. But by May 1875, Sigtryggur's faith in Ontario was beginning to waiver. The hardships that his countrymen had endured during the winter of 1874-75, and hesitance of the government to make substantial allowances to

⁴⁴ *Norðanfari*, 29 April 1875. Translated in Arngrímsson, 116.

⁴⁵ For example, see Houser, 22.

⁴⁶ For Thorlaksson's views on emigration, see *Norðanfari*, 27 January and 18 October 1873. Jónasson's first letter from Ontario appeared in *Norðanfari*, 1 July 1874.

help them get established on the land were a constant source of frustration.⁴⁷ He was ready to pursue other options.

Sigtryggur Jónasson was the only one of the Icelandic leaders involved in the creation of New Iceland in the Canadian Northwest. However, the first initiatives that led to the colony's founding did not come from him, but from an Ontarian. John Taylor, a Methodist lay preacher, had become aware of the Icelanders' plight during the winter of 1874 and decided to take up their cause. On 22 February 1875, he wrote a letter to *The Montreal Witness* explaining the situation at Kinmount and advocating the creation of a number of state-run industrial farms in Ontario where immigrants could earn wages while being instructed in the agricultural methods of the country. He argued that his plan would prevent suffering among immigrants at very little cost to the government, and help ensure that the current of Icelandic emigration would be directed to Canada. Taylor wrote, "A fair prospect of success and the assurance that he will be cared for will induce thousands of their countrymen who are anxious to emigrate to come over and join them. Our now useless and wild lands would be filled up with good, quiet, and orderly settlers."⁴⁸

Taylor's philanthropic suggestions seem to have gone unnoticed by policy makers at both the federal and provincial levels. In early April 1875, he went to Ottawa to secure assistance for the Icelanders and to propose his industrial farm scheme to Dominion officials. He received a cool reception from Ministers hesitant to deal with what they considered to be a problem belonging to the government of Ontario. Under the 1869

⁴⁷ The Canadian Post (Lindsay), 23 April 1875. "It is true that some of the Icelanders were talking of going to Nova Scotia, as there they would get improved lands to settle on, which they have always desired, but been refused here."

⁴⁸ *The Montreal Witness*, 8 April 1875. The letter was dated from 22 February 1875 from Dysart, Haliburton.

Emigration Act, the provinces were responsible for the settlement of waste lands within their boundaries. The Minister of Agriculture believed that it was no business of the Dominion government to be salvaging a failed Ontario colonization scheme.⁴⁹

When funding from the Ontario government to the remaining Kinmount Icelanders was finally cut off,⁵⁰ Taylor once again tried to solicit help, and this time the Dominion government took the initiative. Toward the end of May, Taylor met with the Ministers of Agriculture and Interior. It is not known whether he was still advocating the creation of an industrial farm in Ontario at this time. What is clear is that during the second meeting the Minister of Agriculture suggested the possibility of sending a delegation of Icelanders to inspect land in the Northwest.⁵¹ The Dominion Government had little interest in Ontario colonization schemes, but fostering a colony of Icelanders in the Northwest was another matter.

Since acquiring the Northwest from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869, the Government of Canada had been anxious to promote immigration to the region as part of a larger nation-building strategy. In order to accomplish this goal as quickly and efficiently as possible, the Dominion government sought to settle ethnic groups in bloc settlements. In 1872, parcels of land were set aside for Scotch, German, and Swiss immigrants. These settlements were a disappointment, but the policy proved much more successful in developing settlements of Russian Mennonites and repatriated French-

⁴⁹ NAC, RG 17, vol. 1510, p. 164, Luc Letellier de St. Just to Adam Crooks, 10 April 1875.

⁵⁰ AO, RG 11-11, vol. 3, p. 482, David Spence to Sigtryggur Jónasson, 19 May 1875.

⁵¹ NAC RG 17, vol. 135, file 14103, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 June 1875.

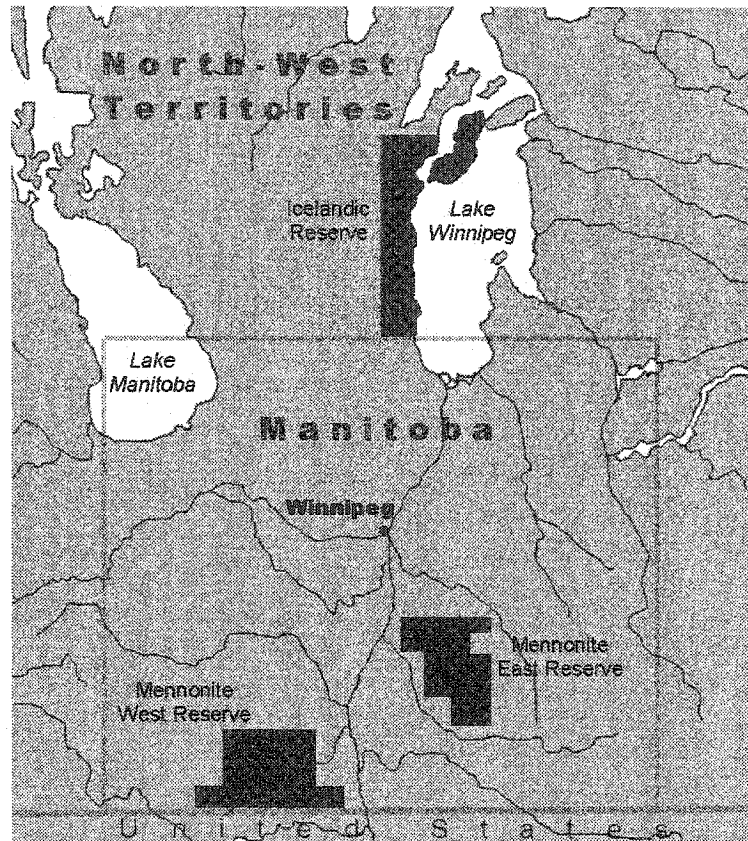


Fig. 5. Icelandic and Mennonite bloc settlements in Manitoba and the North-west Territories, 1875.

Source: Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

Canadians from New England in 1874.⁵² It was the Mennonite settlement in southeastern Manitoba that was the immediate precedent for the Icelandic reserve established in 1875.

With a mandate from the Dominion Government to find a site for a bloc colony of Icelanders, John Taylor convened a meeting at Kinmount on 30 May 1875. This meeting, chaired by Sigtryggur Jónasson with Friðjón Friðriksson acting as secretary, resolved that a delegation should be sent to Manitoba examine lands there. The minutes recorded by Friðriksson show the influence of Ólafsson's ideas, and are the first suggestion that the Kinmount Icelanders wished to form a separate settlement for the preservation of their language and culture:

...The Icelanders have been trying to find a suitable place both in the United States and eastern provinces of Canada where they could get a quantity of good land set apart for the exclusive settlement of Icelanders, who are now in America [and] those who will immigrate in the future, but not yet found anything they thought would answer the purpose, and whereas they have preserved their language [and] nationality for more than one thousand years unchanged and wish to do so in the future, but this cannot be done without their uniting and forming a settlement by themselves.⁵³

That the Icelanders at the meeting wanted to live together in large, prosperous rural settlement is corroborated by other evidence.⁵⁴ However, it is difficult to find any other indication of the cultural and political motivations articulated by Friðriksson.⁵⁵

After receiving Taylor's report on the meeting at Kinmount, the Dominion government forwarded the necessary funds for the journey of the Icelandic deputation to Manitoba. Taylor, Sigtryggur and Einar Jónasson, Skafti Arason and Kristján Jónsson left Kinmount on 2 July 1875. The party increased to six when Sigurður Kristófersson, a

⁵² Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 186.

⁵³ Included in NAC, RG 17, vol. 135, file 14103, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 June 1875.

⁵⁴ See Magnússon, 26.

⁵⁵ Except in the writing of Friðriksson himself. See Archives of Manitoba (hereafter AM), New Iceland Collection, MG 8, A 6-7, Fridjon Fridriksson to Jon Bjarnason, 15 June 1875.

Milwaukee Icelander, joined them in the United States en route to Manitoba. After arriving in Winnipeg they met with the Dominion Lands Agent, Mr. Codd, who showed them maps of Manitoba demarcating which lands were available and which had already been taken up. "By these means we found that there was no land in the province which we considered suitable and attractive to the Icelanders, so that we had to look outside the province."⁵⁶ On the recommendation of the Lands Agent the deputation proceeded approximately fifty miles north of Winnipeg, past the 1870 boundary of the province, to the west coast of Lake Winnipeg.⁵⁷ Part of the reason for this decision was that the farmland within the province had been decimated by a grasshopper plague that summer. The settlers from Ontario that the deputation spoke with said that the only drawback to Manitoba was the grasshoppers; the Icelanders reasoned that since the lands along the lake had been immune from these pests, they must offer all the advantages of Manitoba without the most significant disadvantage.⁵⁸ As soon as the deputation returned to Winnipeg, Taylor telegraphed the Minister of the Interior requesting that the lands along the lakeshore extending north from the boundary line of Manitoba to Grindstone Point be set aside for an Icelandic reserve, which for the first time was referred to as 'New Iceland'.⁵⁹

In the detailed report the Icelandic deputation submitted to the Department of Agriculture, there is no mention of the cultural and political goals that were so prominent in the minutes from the meeting at Kinmount. What it did contain was careful evaluation of the varied resources and opportunities available in the area they had selected as the site

⁵⁶ NAC, RG 17, vol. 140, file 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

⁵⁷ Ibid., file 14644, 11 August 1875.

⁵⁸ Ibid., file 14663, 31 August 1875.

⁵⁹ NAC, RG 17, vol. 140, file 14644, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 11 August 1875.

for a 'United Icelandic Colony'.⁶⁰ Above all, the report stressed the suitability of the region for mixed farming. The deputation correctly identified the banks of White Mud River as being well suited for cultivation.⁶¹ The Icelanders, however, were much more experienced at stock-raising than growing cereal crops, so the availability of both options was paramount. The deputation was well aware of this and made special note of the many natural hay meadows and marshes: "The settler may therefore keep immediately as many cows or other stock as he pleases."⁶²

The availability of employment was also prominent in the report. They stressed that the plentiful supply of timber for fuel and building purposes could also be an export commodity, facilitated by the presence of a sawmill on Big Island. Of even greater commercial potential were the abundant fish in Lake Winnipeg. The report listed the various types of fish caught, noting that whitefish was bound to become an especially valuable commodity. Employment was also available south of the colony, where the line of the Canadian Pacific Railway was under construction.⁶³

Much of the historiography claims that it was the area's distance from other settlements that attracted the Icelanders. Jonas Thor argues that one of the reasons the deputation chose the lakeshore over the fertile prairies of southern Manitoba was that it contained the "required isolation" in which "their ever-present dream of a large, exclusive Icelandic colony" could be fulfilled.⁶⁴ In reality, the deputation listed the site's closeness to proposed transportation links as one of its main advantages. At that time, the line of

⁶⁰ Ibid., file 14663, 31 August 1875.

⁶¹ The deputation saw garden plots of potatoes and Red River corn along the banks of the river. They were so impressed that they immediately 'baptized' the White Mud as 'Icelander's River'. See Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Thor, 80.

the Canadian Pacific Railway was projected to pass only twenty-eight miles from the proposed settlement's southern boundary, and even closer to the west.⁶⁵ Far from being motivated by a foolish desire for complete isolation, the choice of the Lake Winnipeg colony site was the result of a very practical evaluation of several key economic considerations by the Icelandic deputation. They could not foresee that the route of the railway would be changed, that the unusually high water would flood the land, that a crippling smallpox epidemic would hit in 1876, and that the settlers would only learn how to fish in the lake after a difficult apprenticeship. The deputation's carefully reasoned choices appear mistaken only with the benefit of hindsight.

The Icelandic deputation was sent to the Northwest with a mandate from the Dominion government to find a bloc colony site similar to that created for the Russian Mennonites.⁶⁶ The area that the Icelanders selected was well known to officials in Ottawa. In February 1875, a group of Cree from Norway House had petitioned to have the land along the White Mud River set aside as a reserve. The government looked favourably on the project until the prospect of the Icelandic settlement materialized, following which the Icelandic proposal was given priority.⁶⁷ In late August a Norwegian delegate visited the region and reported, "The Townships...upon the western shore of Lake Winnipeg are suitable for Scandinavian settlement of a poorer class of emigrants (such as labourers and fishermen) from the United States."⁶⁸ In the minds of the Dominion officials, the Icelanders fit well into both categories.

⁶⁵ A map showing the line of the CPR in relation to the settlement was contained in the Canadian Government pamphlet *Nýa Ísland í Kanada* (1875). See Gerrard, 20.

⁶⁶ NAC, RG 17, A I 2, vol. 1509, p. 230, Lowe to C.J. Sheehey (Michigan Central RR), 9 June 1875.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG10, vol. 3613, file 4060, Petition of the Norway House Cree to settle at Grassy Narrows, 1875.

⁶⁸ "Report of A. Halvorson," *Canada, Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, p. 166.

Following their return from the Northwest, the Icelandic deputation made presentations to the Icelanders in Milwaukee and Ontario. The Icelanders in Milwaukee, led by Rev. Jón Bjarnason, expressed their readiness to proceed to the Northwest if the Dominion Government was willing to provide them with free transport.⁶⁹ No support was forthcoming, and only thirteen actually made the journey west. The deputation then returned to Kinmount, but found that most of the men had gone to work on the construction of the Northern Railway. On 29 August at Gravenhurst, the Icelandic railway navvies endorsed the deputation's report, and requested that Sigtryggur and Taylor proceed to Ottawa to ask for a loan enabling them to travel to their colony that fall.⁷⁰

Contrary to much of the historiography describing their subsequent trip to Ottawa, Taylor and Jónasson encountered no significant opposition to the idea of moving the Kinmount Icelanders to a bloc colony in the Northwest. It has traditionally been asserted that Lord Dufferin intervened in the matter and convinced sceptical Ministers that the Icelanders warranted the expenditure.⁷¹ In fact, Dufferin played no part in the creation of the colony. He had used his influence earlier, albeit in a very minor way. John Taylor tried to meet with Dufferin during his first trip to Ottawa in April 1875. He had to settle for leaving a letter with his executive secretary, who in turn forwarded it to the Minister of Agriculture with a covering letter:

His Excellency will be glad to learn that you feel at liberty to make some recommendation calculated to relieve the distress of those who have already

⁶⁹ Included in NAC, RG 17, vol. 140, file 14678, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 3 September 1875. There is no indication of how many people attended this meeting.

⁷⁰ Minutes of this meeting were included in *Ibid.*, file 14679, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 3 September 1875.

⁷¹ See Thor, 81 and Arngrímsson, 125-126.

settled here as well as to promote the arrival of more Immigrants from a country in which His Excellency feels the warmest interest.⁷²

This was, however, the extent of Lord Dufferin's involvement. He and his family left Ottawa for a holiday in England and Ireland on 11 May and did not return until 23 October.⁷³ In any event, the sudden rejection of the plan by the very Ministers who initiated it seems unlikely.

While the Departments of Agriculture and Interior received the report of the Icelandic deputation at the end of August, the Orders-in-Council that granted the colony site and the necessary funds for supplies were not finalized until 8 October.⁷⁴ This month delay was not caused by internal opposition to the principle of settling the Icelanders in the Northwest, but by two key mistakes made during the application process by John Taylor. First, Taylor had asked for a larger land grant than stipulated in the Icelandic deputation's report. On 11 September, he wrote to the Minister of Agriculture asking that the reserve's southern border be set at the mouth of the Red River rather than the 1870 northern border of Manitoba.⁷⁵ Because there were a number of homestead entries just south of the provincial boundary, the Surveyor General decided that the reserve could not be extended any further south. He also denied Taylor's request that the northern

⁷² Taylor to Dufferin, 12 April 1875. Included as an enclosure in NAC, RG 17, vol. 131, file 13750, Henry Moody to the Minister of Agriculture, 16 April 1875.

⁷³ Gladys Chantler Walker, ed., *Lady Dufferin, My Canadian Journal, 1872-1878* (Toronto: Longman Canada Limited, 1976), 169-171. The earliest mentions of Dufferin in Icelandic historiography claim that it was as a result of his intervention that the Icelandic deputation was sent to Manitoba in July 1875. See Magnusson, 26; Sigtryggur Jónasson, *The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press, 1901), 9. With the exception of Nelson Gerrard (20), all subsequent historians have moved Dufferin's role ahead in time from July to September, when he was still on vacation overseas. See Kristjansson, 26-27; Lindal, 113; Arngrímsson, 125; Thor, 81.

⁷⁴ NAC, RG 17, vol. 1629, file 14911, Privy Council to the Minister of Agriculture, 8 October 1875; *Ibid.*, file 14915.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 141, file 14716, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 11 September 1875.

boundary of the colony be set at Grindstone Point due to the prospect of valuable lime and sandstone deposits there.⁷⁶

Taylor also made a crucial mistake in the negotiation of loans and other forms of assistance to the Icelanders. In order for the plan to move forward, two issues had to be addressed—the removal of the Icelanders from Ontario, and the provisioning of their colony through the winter. The first was resolved easily enough; on 13 September, the Privy Council met to discuss the Icelandic settlement plan. Acting Minister of Agriculture W.D. Scott presented a report outlining the desperate situation of the Icelanders at Kinmount and the clear need for action: “suffering [and] death will be greatly increased during the coming winter if they are not relieved.” Scott stated that the sum of \$5,000 would be needed to move the Icelanders from Ontario, and recommended that half be paid out of the Department of Agriculture’s existing budget for the inland transport of immigrants, and half be granted as a loan to be repaid by the Icelanders.⁷⁷ The Privy Council approved these measures, but did not resolve the important question of how the colony would be provisioned through its first winter.

John Taylor had suggested how this might be accomplished while in Winnipeg with the Icelandic deputation. Taylor told Department of Agriculture officials that he had arrived at verbal agreement with Hudson’s Bay Company Chief Factor John McTavish to guarantee a loan of \$5,000 to the Icelanders. However, Taylor did not get the offer in writing, and once he returned to Ottawa the company refused to acknowledge that any such offer had been made. On 3 September, Taylor again proposed the plan to McTavish, stating that the Icelandic colonization scheme required the Company’s

⁷⁶ Ibid., RG 2, Records of the Privy Council Office, vol. 5652, p. 111, 8 October 1875.

⁷⁷ Ibid., RG 2, vol. 5652, p. 111, 8 October 1875.

assistance to go forward. On advice from government officials, Taylor suggested that the Icelandic loan be made on same terms as the Mennonite Bond of 1874. Under that agreement, the Mennonite Society of Ontario guaranteed a loan to their incoming co-religionists from Russia. Since there was no such community of Icelanders anywhere in Canada, Taylor's plan called for the Hudson's Bay Company to assume the responsibility.⁷⁸ Chief Factor McTavish finally agreed to the proposal in a telegram dated 14 September.⁷⁹ With this guarantee in place, John Lowe appointed Taylor Icelandic agent and instructed him to begin preparation for the movement of the Icelanders to their new home.⁸⁰ Sigtryggur Jónasson then set about the work of informing the Icelanders at various points in Ontario of the arrangements that had been made. Jónasson, however, would not make the journey west. He had been appointed as an emigration agent of the Dominion Government, and was soon on his way back to Iceland to bring out more settlers for New Iceland.⁸¹

At least 270 Icelanders formerly scattered throughout Ontario converged in Toronto near the end of September. After a long journey, they reached the growing prairie city of Winnipeg on 11 October. Many of the single women and some older daughters once again found work in domestic service rather than proceeding north with the rest of the group.⁸² That move, however, was once again delayed by more wrangling between Taylor and the Hudson's Bay Company. Chief Factor McTavish's superior apparently refused to honour the promise that had been made to guarantee the loan. The Company finally relented after several tense days of negotiation, and furnished the

⁷⁸ NAC, RG 17, vol. 1629, Lowe to W.D. Scott, 17 October 1876.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., A I 2, vol. 1512, p. 3, Lowe to Taylor, 15 September 1875.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 1, Lowe to Jónasson.

⁸² Simonson, 5.

required supplies.⁸³ Finally, after a month in transit, the Icelanders arrived in their reserve on 21 October 1875.⁸⁴

* * *

For most of the settlers who went to New Iceland, the potential economic advantages were the main attraction. The preservation of Icelandic culture, language, and religion only appear in the minutes of the meeting recorded by Friðjón Friðriksson, friend of Jón Ólafsson and signer of the Alaska petition. This is not to suggest that the Icelandic immigrants in Ontario did not want to live in a bloc settlement. But the evidence indicating that they shared a dream of a politico-cultural entity similar to that described by Jón Ólafsson in the context of Alaska is unconvincing at best. While New Iceland seemed to offer the Ontario Icelanders a chance to escape poverty, the Canadian government saw it as part of a larger strategy for settling the Northwest efficiently and cheaply. Dominion officials poured over maps of the Northwest and drew the imaginary lines that would bound the proposed Icelandic settlement. It was their hope that the Northwest would soon be filled up by similar blocs that would help fulfil the national dream of many Canadian politicians.

New Iceland has come to be associated with a much different sort of nationalism advocated by a man who had no part in its founding. This was the dream of an all-Icelandic Alaska most clearly articulated by Icelandic poet and journalist Jón Ólafsson. Jón's feverish imaginings had little in common with the practical strategies of men such as Páll Thorlaksson and Sigtryggur Jónasson for establishing viable Icelandic settlements in the United States and Canada. Neither man believed that isolation from the host

⁸³ NAC, RG 17, vol. 1629, Lowe to Scott, 17 October 1876.

⁸⁴ Ibid., vol. 144, file 15091, Taylor to Lowe, 21 October 1875.

society was the answer. Rather, they advocated a combination of integration, and the maintenance of old world social networks.

Nonetheless, Icelandic ethnic historians have imagined them as part of the same project—the search for a ‘New Iceland’ dream colony that would fulfil the most fervent desire of all Icelandic immigrants in North America. This idea has been important for how the writers understood their ethnic community. It has been used to reinforce old loyalties to the country of origin, and to define the relationship between the immigrants and the society they entered. It is a fundamental part of how the early years of Icelandic migration have been constructed as a latter-day saga by Icelandic ethnic writers seeking to reconcile past and present. It is to this story that we now turn.

CHAPTER 5

CONSTRUCTING A NEW WORLD SAGA

The truth of some of my details might be disputed. Perhaps things did not happen in just such a way...But I'm not interested in some narrow historic truth here. I'm more interested in a good, serviceable mythic truth.¹

In the previous chapters, several key myths about the beginning of Icelandic migration to Canada have been explored through a careful analysis of primary and secondary sources. This approach has revealed a much different story from that usually presented by historians of Icelandic descent. These writers have rarely been professional historians; religious and secular community leaders, professionals, journalists, novelists, poets, genealogists, and amateur historians have been the producers of historical knowledge among the Icelanders in Canada. Their constructions of the past have reflected important socio-historical changes in the community. The most profound shift occurred between the 1930s and the 1960s when Icelandic was slowly being supplanted by English as the dominant language of both public discourse and literary expression. The interpretations developed by immigrants such as Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson and the poet Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson differed in both specific emphasis and overall purpose from those produced in later years by the Canadian-raised generation of writers that included Laura Goodman-Salverson, Joseph Thorson, Wilhelm Kristjanson and Walter J. Lindal.

The desire to address fundamental changes in the Icelandic community brought on by the decline of the language, and the need to define and redefine relationships with the ancestral and adopted homelands, remained constant between the immigrant writers

¹ David Arnason, "The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings," in *The New Icelanders: A North American Community*, David Arnason and Vincent Arnason, eds. (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), 6.

and the first Canadian-born generation. What shifted dramatically was how these writers conceptualized their ethnic community. The immigrant generation wrote in Icelandic for an Icelandic audience on both sides of the Atlantic. They imagined an international Western Icelandic community that had never lost its affection for the homeland and was determined to maintain its language and culture in the new world. Many among the first Canadian-born generation shared their predecessors' belief in fostering continued ties with Iceland, but also argued for greater integration of their community into the social and economic life of their new homeland, even if it meant a cutting off of some of the old Icelandic roots. Writing in English, they addressed a general Anglo-Canadian audience, incorporated the Icelandic story into the nation-building framework dominant in Canadian history at the time of their writing, and advocated an integrative vision of Canadian nationality. They believed that the establishing of Canadian nationhood necessarily involved weaving the best portions of each heritage into a greater tapestry, while at the same time retaining diversity. These writers argued that the history of their group in Iceland and in Canada provided ample proof that they had much to contribute to the emergent Canadian nation.

In the past two decades, historians have paid increasing attention to how individuals and societies relate to the past. According to John Tosh "one of the strongest bonds uniting a large social grouping is its members' awareness of a common history. Without that awareness men and women could not easily acknowledge the claims on their loyalty of large abstractions."² Two of the most powerful social abstractions that people identify with are nation and ethnicity. Both are often represented as timeless,

² John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Longman, 1984), 3.

essential categories of collective human experience, but theorists of nationalism such as Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson have argued that nations are in fact relatively recent cultural inventions produced by particular historic circumstances. They appear timeless, in part, because their roots are said to extend into the distant past.³ Hobsbawm contends that national traditions claiming to represent distant antiquity are often of a relatively recent vintage. These ‘invented traditions’ are created during periods of rapid change in order to cope with new economic, social, political, or ideological realities. They serve to reaffirm stability or legitimacy in turbulent periods, and to bolster old loyalties.⁴

Regardless of their artificiality, nations command a profound emotional legitimacy among their constituents. In trying to understand why people are willing to fight and die for them, Benedict Anderson has defined the nation as an ‘imagined political community’:

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each live the images of their communion....It is imagined as community because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.”⁵

In Anderson’s view, vernacular languages, written texts, disseminated by print-capitalism—including histories—and shared national symbols, are the key mediators through which individuals imagine their deep connection with other members of their nation.

³ Werner Sollers, “Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity,” in Werner Sollers, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), xiii.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7.

Werner Sollers has argued that ethnicity is constructed through a similar process of invention and imagining generally adhering to several broad characteristics:

Ethnic groups are typically imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units. They seem to be always already in existence. As a subject of study, each group yields an essential continuum of certain myths and traits, or human capital. The focus is on the group's preservation and survival, which appear threatened. Conflicts generally seem to emerge from the world outside of the particular ethnic group investigated. Assimilation is the foe of ethnicity; hence there are numerous polemics against the blandness of the melting pot mainstream, and the majority culture....⁶

Such a definition emphasizes the oppositional stance of ethnicity, but as Adrian Hastings has pointed out, nations are frequently formed from one or more ethnicities who have come to imagine themselves as part of a larger national community.⁷ Constructing the past is a key component of that process.

Migration historians have recently begun to examine the role of myth in defining ethnic and national identities.⁸ In these studies, myth has been defined both in the traditional sense as something that is untrue, and in the less conventional sense as a construction of past historical experience, real or imagined, through which people define themselves in order to meet needs grounded in the present.⁹ In Canada, substantial work relevant to exploring Icelandic myth, memory, and ethnic identity has been done on the Scots. Edward Cowan has argued that the Scots have been involved in a continuous process of self-mythologization that extends back to the original settlements.¹⁰ Key to

⁶ Sollers, xiv.

⁷ Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

⁸ Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance, "Myth, Migration, and the Making of Memory: An Introduction," in Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance, eds., *Myth, Migration, and the Making of Memory* (Halifax: Fernwood Press, 1999), 14.

⁹ Edward J. Cowan, "The Myth of Scotch Canada," in *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

this process has been the reinterpretation of their group's old world history in order to define and redefine themselves in a new world context.

This perspective has informed recent works on historic myths among people of Icelandic descent. David Arnason incorporates several mythic stories—including the volcano-induced exodus, Lord Dufferin's patronage, and New Iceland as a politico-cultural vision—into what he calls 'the myth of beginnings.' Arnason argues that this shared understanding of a common past is a unifying force that helps maintain group identity among people of Icelandic descent in spite of the fact that few of them speak Icelandic or live in homogenous Icelandic communities.¹¹

Literary scholars Daisy Neijmann and Kirsten Wolf have attempted to explain why particular myths have developed in Icelandic-Canadian writing. Neijmann has argued that a sense of alienation from both Iceland and Canada was instrumental in shaping the community's myths. In her view, accusations from Icelandic nationalists that emigrants were traitors to the dream of an independent Icelandic nation-state left a deep mental wound among Icelandic immigrants who were also being subjected to Anglo-Canadian suspicion and intolerance. Neijmann claims that in order to find legitimacy in their history, and to forge a positive self-image in the new world, three core myths gradually developed in Icelandic-Canadian writing.¹²

The first myth emphasized how the Icelanders were the direct descendants of the adventurous Vikings, and had thus inherited their love of freedom and adventure, and spirit of high-achievement. The second myth claimed that the social and physical environment of Iceland had made life there unbearable, leaving them no choice but to

¹¹ Arnason, 8.

¹² Daisy Neijmann, *The Icelandic Voice in Canadian Letters: The Contribution of Icelandic-Canadian Writers to Canadian Literature* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997), 75-77.

emigrate from an otherwise beloved homeland.¹³ The final myth held that the Icelandic immigrants exhibited a disproportionate genius for success in North America. By providing a string of success stories, writers simultaneously portrayed them as being the best Icelanders and the best Canadians (or Americans).¹⁴

Kirsten Wolf has argued that Icelandic-Canadians conceptualized their migration story in similar terms as other historic migrations—the settlement of Iceland, the Vínland explorations, and the Biblical exodus—in order to emphasize continuity with a heroic past.¹⁵ Wolf states that Icelandic-Canadian myths have been constructed as part of a strategy for adjusting to life in North America:

Self-defence, self-justification, and the need to legitimize their reality in the New World appear to have been what motivated the Western Icelanders' social myth, the main function of which was, of course, to create a feeling of group cohesiveness among the immigrants and their descendants by giving them a sense of cultural identity in a place virtually devoid of any history or tradition.¹⁶

The contentious claim that the Icelanders were entering a place 'devoid of history and tradition'—surely interaction with the host society must have had some impact—points to broader problems with Wolf's argument. Both she and Neijmann provide ample evidence of these myths in Icelandic-Canadian literary and historical writings, but they do not adequately situate their creation and significance in specific historic contexts. Wolf chooses to focus on Walter J. Lindal's *The Icelanders in Canada* (1967) because she believes it represents the myth "in its full-fledged form."¹⁷ Lindal is thus posited as the definitive synthesis in a cumulative process of myth-making extending back to the

¹³ Ibid., 78.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kirsten Wolf, "Emigration and Mythmaking: The Case of the Icelanders in Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Études ethniques au Canada*, 33, 2 (2001), 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

first settlers. Neijmann similarly argues that English-language writers properly belong in the category of ‘immigrant literature’ because of their commonality with earlier works.¹⁸ But were these two generations of writers really the same? Were there not any important ways in which the historical imaginings of one differed markedly from the other?

Icelandic-Canadian historical writing has never been systematically analyzed. It is treated only tangentially in Neijmann’s survey of Icelandic-Canadian literature, and in Wolf’s recent article on myth-making little is said about the lives and perspectives of the historians.¹⁹ By lumping the immigrant and first Canadian-born generations into one group, they have neglected an important shift in historical interpretation corresponding with the adoption of English as the primary language of expression among people of Icelandic descent. Elements of the myths they identify can indeed be found in writings across generations, but the ways in which they were utilized to forge identity and community changed as the younger generation re-examined the historical canon to find new relevance for old stories. The shift to English in historical writing by members of the first Canadian-born generation was of profound ontological importance. It represented a re-casting of the migration story from stressing ongoing links with Iceland, to tracing the origins of the Icelandic contribution to the building of the Canadian nation.

Immigrant historians wrote in Icelandic for an audience in Iceland and North America. They sought to demonstrate continuity with the Icelandic past, and to dispel allegations that their decision to leave was based on a rejection of the cultural heritage of their homeland. Most considered themselves to be *Vestur Íslendingar* (West or Western Icelander)—a term that was first coined by native Icelanders during the emigration

¹⁸ Neijmann, 99-100.

¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, 76-79; Wolf, 1-15.

period, and later adopted by the emigrants themselves.²⁰ While many native Icelanders still refer to people of Icelandic descent in North America as *Vestur Íslendingar*, in Canada it was largely superseded by the term *Icelandic-Canadian* around the time of the Second World War. These two names have sometimes been used interchangeably in Canada, but more often the former has implied continuing affinity with the ancestral homeland, while the latter stresses a primary allegiance to Canada. Here, 'Western Icelandic' will be used to refer to immigrant and first-generation historical writings in Icelandic, while 'Icelandic-Canadian' connotes the English language works of the first Canadian-born generation.²¹

Immigrant historians imagined all Western Icelanders to be part of the same transnational Icelandic community. This was reflected in how they conceived the geographical scope of their histories. Until 1950, almost all histories of Icelandic migration and settlement advertised the field of study as *í Vesturheimi* ('in the West' or 'in the Western home'). This, in fact, was an accurate reflection of the connectedness of Icelandic communities on both sides of the border from the late 1870s until the First World War. Ties of family, friendship, religion, language, and culture made it easy for migrants to travel between Icelandic settlements in such far-flung places as Minnesota, Lundar, Manitoba, Markerville, Alberta, and Blaine, Washington.

The immigrant generation took great care to document the history of these places and many other Icelandic settlements scattered across the continent. These settlement histories were commemorative and descriptive rather than analytical, and borrowed their

²⁰ This term did not carry any pejorative connotations. See Neijmann, 94, 99-100. Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson also used the term *Vestmenn* (West-men). See Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Vestmenn: útvarpserindi um landnám íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Reykjavík, 1935).

²¹ Neijmann includes the first English-language works in the category of Western Icelandic immigrant literature. See Neijmann, 99-100.

structure from historiographical forms indigenous to the Icelandic literary tradition. The settlement histories that appeared annually in the *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* between 1898 and 1954 were modelled on the medieval Icelandic *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements), a medieval chronicle of the earliest settlers of Iceland during the ninth and tenth centuries. This old form was readily adapted to a new context, in order to establish a vital link between their nineteenth century emigration and the Icelandic past. When the *Álmanak* series began, the editor commented that he hoped this new *Landnamabók* would prove as useful for future historians as its medieval counterpart.²² The *Álmanak* histories have fulfilled his wish. They provided the source material for later writers attempting to sketch out the broader patterns and significance of the Icelandic migration and settlement experience. The first and most comprehensive attempt at synthesis was Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson's five-volume *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Story of the Icelanders in the Western Home) published between 1940 and 1953.²³ The use of the Icelandic word *saga* in Þorsteinsson's title is itself a reference to the most famous medieval Icelandic literary genre.²⁴

Immigrant historians constructed a vision of the past that reflected contemporary concerns within their community. Clearly one of the most important was the desire to set emigration in a favourable light.²⁵ Resentment against emigrants in Iceland began in the

²² Magnús Einarsson, "Oral Tradition and Ethnic Boundaries; 'West' Icelandic Verses and Anecdotes," *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Études ethniques au Canada*, 7 (1975), 20-21.

²³ Volumes four and five were edited and supplemented by University of Manitoba History Professor Tryggvi J. Oleson.

²⁴ This has been repeated in many histories of the Icelandic migration and settlement. See Thorstina Walters, *Modern Sagas: the Story of the Icelanders in North America* (Fargo, ND: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953); Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965); Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985); Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: the Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000).

²⁵ Neijmann, 75-76.

1870s with the departure of the first large groups, and reached a fever pitch during the mass emigrations of the 1880s and 1890s. Some members of the Icelandic nationalist movement branded emigrants as cowards and traitors guilty of abandoning their homeland at precisely the time when it needed them the most.²⁶ The influential newspaper *Ísafold* set its editorial stance firmly against emigration and hired poet Benedikt Gröndal to write a polemic against emigration that stressed the danger of the movement to the health of nation. Gröndal and *Ísafold* were vociferously denounced by return-migrant Jón Ólafsson, promoter of the Alaska settlement scheme, in the colourfully titled “A Word of Sense on Emigrants and Emigration: An Answer and Address to Editor Bjarni Jónasson on the Unsubstantiated Lies, Slander and Ill-Advised Rubbish Disseminated and Published by *Ísafold*. Benedikt Gröndal Stripped, Chastised and Set in the Stocks.”²⁷ Ólafsson portrayed the Western Icelanders as émigré Icelandic nationalists extending the cultural reach of their nation to North America rather than traitors to the national dream. Other return migrants, such as Canadian emigration agent Baldvin L. Baldvinsson, primarily cited economic reasons for leaving, but believed that those economic problems were, in part, caused by the prevailing political order in Iceland:

What particularly attracts Icelanders to emigrate is not the fact that they do not have a clear idea of the difference between their own country and America, although many of them would confess they do not, but the poverty they face at home, combined with a general dissatisfaction with a political system they are powerless to change. For many good farmers, it is the oppressive power of the local authorities that is forcing them to leave, which should come as no surprise,

²⁶ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, “Icelandic Emigration,” in P.C. Emmer and M. Mörner, eds., *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the International Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe* (New York: Berg, 1992), 107.

²⁷ Arngrímsson, 76.

as this power is increasing almost daily. The present system, it could be said, rewards laziness and sloth, while suppressing industry and thrift.²⁸

According to Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, the bitter and vitriolic debate over emigration had largely ended by the opening years of the twentieth century.²⁹

Immigrant historian Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson is a clear example of a writer who attempted to address the contentious legacy of emigration. Þorsteinsson immigrated to Canada as an adult at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was an accomplished poet, and the most prominent Western Icelandic historian. In explaining the reasons for the emigrations he stressed that environmental calamities in Iceland had made life there intolerable, and left the Icelanders no choice but to leave their beloved homeland. The first volume of Þorsteinsson's *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* contained a long, drawn-out narration of the many disasters that plagued Iceland in the centuries leading up to emigration.³⁰ Neijmann uses this aspect of Þorsteinsson's writing as her prime evidence for the myth that justified emigration by claiming that the emigrants had been pushed out by forces beyond their control.

Neijmann and Wolf believe that resentment against emigrants was one of two factors prompting the development of myths about emigration in the Icelandic community, the other being a sense of alienation from Canadian society. Let us consider these in turn. The impact of emigration on those who participated in it would indeed have had an important influence on their writing. However, the nationalist discourse of Iceland's intellectual elite was likely of less importance to the individual migrant than the

²⁸ *Heimskringla*, 28 April 1887; quoted and translated in Arngrímsson, 73-74.

²⁹ Kjartansson, 107.

³⁰ Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Winnipeg: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1940), 1-80.

more personal implications of leaving. As Dirk Hoerder has observed, emigration involved a break with the 'microenvironment' of family and friends that often resulted in feelings of homesickness and remorse for many years after. Young people, in particular, might have felt guilty over leaving relatives who required care in their old age.³¹ An immigrant writer such as Þorsteinsson who had arrived in Canada as an adult would have had first-hand knowledge of both the public reaction against emigration, and the personal implications of the decision to leave, and those concerns are reflected in his writing.

This overarching concern with justifying emigration was, however, of dubious significance for the English-language historians. Wolf and Neijmann's argument rests on the assumption that the experiences and concerns of adult migrants raised in Iceland during the nineteenth century were the same as those of their Canadian-raised successors. For the Icelandic-Canadian writers, Iceland was a completely ideational place, constructed out of books and the often rose-tinted memories of older family members. The ancestral homeland, and the implications of leaving it, could not be the same for those who had been born and grown up in Canada, and felt themselves to owe a primary loyalty to the country of adoption. It is therefore important to distinguish here between the historiographical contributions of the Western Icelandic and Icelandic-Canadian generations.

Similarly in need of revision is Neijmann and Wolf's assertion that myths were created out of a sense of alienation from the host society. By most accounts, the Icelanders experienced a smooth integration into Anglo-Canadian society. They were among the most favoured classes of immigrants sought out by the Canadian government, and were not subjected to anywhere near the same level of nativistic prejudice directed at

³¹ Hoerder, "From Migrants to Ethnics," 232-233.

other 'new Canadians' in the early twentieth century. The major reason for this was that from very early on, Icelanders recognized the importance of learning English and acculturating themselves to Anglo-Canadian norms in order to better their economic circumstances. Prominent Canadians took note, frequently praising their willingness to integrate at a time when high volumes of immigration from Europe were perceived as a threat to the established cultural order.³² Just over thirty years after the arrival of the first settlers, a contributor to J.S. Woodsworth's *Strangers Within Our Gates* wrote: "That [the Icelanders] have prospered as they have, and have so readily adapted themselves to Western methods is a remarkable testimony to this industrious people."³³

There were several other key factors that helped build a positive public perception of the Icelanders in Canada during the initial decades of the twentieth century. The Icelandic population of Winnipeg was concentrated in the newly constructed middle-class neighbourhoods west of the city centre rather than the immigrant ghettos of the north end.³⁴ The Icelanders' also served willingly in the First World War. Icelandic community leaders encouraged young men to join the army, and played a lead role in forming the 223rd Scandinavian Battalion in 1916. In the same year, the wives of several prominent Icelandic servicemen formed the Jón Sigurðsson Chapter of the Imperial Order

³² "In power to acquire a knowledge of the English language [the Icelanders] are in a class by themselves. An Icelander who knows no word of English when the ground is being prepared for seed in the spring will speak the language with scarcely a trace of a foreign accent by the time the harvest is garnered in the fall. The Icelandic girls have shown a willingness to enter domestic service, and they quickly acquire the Canadian customs, both in dress and in ideals. When they return to the home they become unconscious teachers, and it thus happens that Canadian customs are rapidly being adopted by the Icelanders as a whole." W.D. Scott, "Immigration and Population," in Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty, eds., *Canada and its Provinces: A History of the Canadian People and their Institutions by One Hundred Associates. Vol. VII: The Dominion Political Development, Part II* (Glasgow: Edinburgh University Press, 1913), 532.

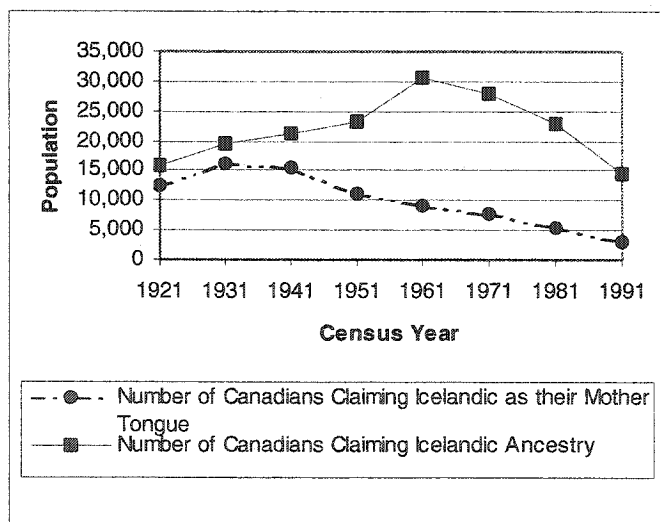
³³ J.S. Woodsworth, *Strangers Within Our Gates, or, Coming Canadians* (Toronto: F.C. Stephenson, 1909), 95.

³⁴ Anne Brydon, "Icelanders," in Robert Paul Magocsi, ed., *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario and University of Toronto Press, 1999), 688.

Daughters of the Empire (IODE) to aid in the war effort. Out of an estimated pre-war population of 15,000 upwards of 1,300 Icelandic-Canadians served during the four years of conflict.³⁵ In the period of labour unrest that followed the war, the Icelanders were never associated with radicalism or Bolshevism to the same extent as other immigrant groups such as Ukrainians, Russian Jews or Finns.

Few immigrants arrived in Canada direct from Iceland after 1905, and the First World War brought the movement to a permanent halt. Gradually, some of the cultural forms brought from Iceland began to disappear. The most significant development was the slow decline of the Icelandic language as the mother tongue of people of Icelandic descent. This trend began in the 1930s and accelerated rapidly after the Second World War.

Table 2. Decline in Icelandic language as mother tongue among people of Icelandic descent in Canada, 1921-1991 (for people of wholly Icelandic ancestry).



Source: *Census of Canada, 1921-1991*

³⁵ See Jón Sigurðsson Félagið IOÐE, *Minningarrit Íslenzkra Hermanna 1914-1918* [Record Book of Icelandic Servicemen 1914-1918] (Winnipeg: Jón Sigurðsson Félagið IOÐE, 1929).

The waning of Icelandic language use and the integration of the Icelanders into all levels of Canadian society did not result in the disappearance of an Icelandic ethnic identity in Canada. Assimilation, usually defined as the unconditional acceptance of the dominant forms and values of the host society, is a poor conceptual tool for understanding cultural adaptation in general, and the Icelandic case in particular. More useful is Dirk Hoerder's concept of acculturation, which he defines as "the gradual withering of old roots while sinking new ones at the same time, a process that often takes place unconsciously."³⁶ Anthropologist John Matthiasson suggested that Icelandic ethnic identity in Canada has been characterized by a dualistic focus on outward integration into the broader community, and inward retention of the Icelandic heritage.³⁷ Icelandic ethnicity in Canada has never completely disappeared; it has been transformed as succeeding generations have reinterpreted the meaning of their heritage.

Nonetheless, the apparent decline of the Icelandic language and culture in the early twentieth century deeply concerned many of the community's intellectual elite, especially in the immigrant generation. This is evident in the activities of the *Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (the Icelandic National League of North America). Formed in 1919 as an attempt to draw together various Icelandic cultural groups across the continent under one large umbrella organization, the League's mission was to promote the maintenance of Icelandic culture and heritage, foster co-operation

³⁶ Dirk Hoerder, "From Migrants to Ethnics: Acculturation in a Societal Framework," in Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, eds., *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 212.

³⁷ John Matthiasson, "The Icelandic Canadians: The Paradox of an Assimilated Ethnic Group," in Jean Leonard Elliott, ed, *Two Nations, Many Cultures* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall, 1979), 340. Anthropologist Anne Brydon has further developed this perspective in her study of the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba. See, Anne Brydon, "Celebrating Ethnicity: The Icelanders of Manitoba," *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, 4 (1991): 1-14.

between people of Icelandic descent in America and Iceland, and encourage good citizenship among its members.³⁸

Unitarian Minister Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson was the first President of the League, and the first editor of its journal *Tímarit*. The first issue contained Pétursson's article "Þjóðræknissamtök meðal Íslendinga í Vesturheimi" (National Leagues Among Icelanders in the Western Home), a key source for all subsequent historians of the Icelanders in North America. The purpose of this piece was to expose the historic roots of the Icelandic National League by citing every instance where the Icelandic migrants had formed ethnic organizations, or had asserted their desire not to let their Icelandic nationality slip away. He argued that the Icelandic emigrants had actively displayed their affection for their homeland on numerous occasions, stating "[The emigrants] did not abandon their nationality as soon as they got their mooring in this country, or shed their family ties like sheep shed their wool."³⁹

The section entitled '*Sjálfstæðis – yfirlýsing Íslendinga 1874*' (Icelanders Make A Declaration of Independence 1874) is the first appearance of the much-repeated story of the Icelandic 'Privilegium' or 'Covenant'—the list of terms said to have been dictated to Canadian officials by the *St. Patrick* Icelanders as a condition for their settling in Canada—that is addressed in the second chapter of this study. Pétursson considered this to be a founding moment in the history of the Icelanders in North America:

A meeting was held aboard the ship which can be considered to be among the most important events in the history of the emigrants; it also shows what kind of men these Icelandic emigrants were, who were about to disembark in America.⁴⁰

³⁸ Kristjanson, 464.

³⁹ Rögnvaldur Pétursson, "Þjóðræknissamtök meðal Íslendinga í Vesturheimi." *Tímarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, 1 (1919), 98. Translated for me by Gunnur Ísfeld.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

Pétursson's historical writings portray the Icelandic emigrants as cultural nationalists in the new world. Was his perspective then born out of a concern for combating the charges of resentful nationalists in Iceland that Neijmann and Wolf cite as a key motivator of Icelandic-Canadian myth-makers? As President of the Icelandic National League, this was likely the case; part of the mandate of that organization was to promote good relations with Iceland. However, his desire to address hard feelings over emigration would not have come about as a result of his own personal experience. Pétursson had emigrated with his family at the age of five in 1883. A clearer influence on Pétursson's writing is the level of cultural integration he witnessed among people of Icelandic descent. A perceived threat to Icelandic language and cultural legacy in North America is implicit in both the mandate of the Icelandic National League, and in Pétursson's history. He admonished his fellow Icelanders to help establish teaching positions to protect their national language and culture.⁴¹ In Pétursson's case, it seems to have been his perception of widespread acculturation that fuelled his desire to prop up old ethnic loyalties.

* * *

Later Icelandic-Canadian scholars produced histories written in English with an Anglo-Canadian audience in mind. This change mirrored the greater integration of the community's young intellectual elite into the Anglo-Canadian mainstream. Rather than telling their story for their own group or for people in Iceland, these writers self-consciously attempted to foster a greater understanding of Icelandic history and culture among their non-Icelandic colleagues. This new purpose had important consequences for how they constructed the past. First, emphasis on the immigrant Icelanders' cultural

⁴¹ Ibid., 99.

nationalism prominent in Icelandic-language histories was subordinated to a focus on the Icelanders' contribution to Canada. Second, many of the myths developed by the earlier writers were reformulated and elaborated on to serve a new purpose. They were used not only to define a flattering image for the Icelanders in Canada, but also to demonstrate the value of the Icelandic heritage to the building of the Canadian nation.

This historiographical development was foreshadowed by Sigtryggur Jónasson's *The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada*, an English-language address delivered in 1901 to the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba.⁴² Jónasson was the first Icelander to settle in Canada and one of the most prominent community leaders in the immigrant generation. His address told the story of the founding of New Iceland, but in markedly different terms from the later writings of Pétursson or Þorsteinsson. Jónasson describes the colony not as a politico-cultural project for the preservation of the Icelandic heritage in North America, but as a pragmatic response to alleviate the misery of the Ontario Icelanders. His story ends with the founding of New Iceland, completely ignoring the settlement's tumultuous history after 1875 except for the brief statement: "in spite of several misfortunes in its early days, [New Iceland] now contains some 2,500 prosperous people."⁴³ The fact that Jónasson himself was one of the primary architects of the settlement and had continued to champion its virtues long after many others had lost hope and gone elsewhere probably accounts for his omission of the more painful aspects of New Iceland's story. However, it also served his overall purpose of creating a flattering image of the Icelanders as Canadian immigrants for his Anglo-Canadian audience.

⁴² This address was later published in the society's transactions. Sigtryggur Jónasson, *The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press, 1901).

⁴³ Jónasson, 12.

The overall tone of Jónasson's address evinces a pride in the accomplishments of the Icelanders during their first twenty-five years in Canada, and an assertion of their value as settlers for the Dominion. An important component of his address was the claim that in spite of their rough start in Ontario, prominent Canadians had seen great potential in them from early on. The address contained an early reference to Lord Dufferin's role in the founding of New Iceland,⁴⁴ which Jónasson described as "the open secret":

This is, amongst other things, proven by the words he used in one of his speeches when he visited the Northwest in the summer of 1877. He said to the Icelanders: "I have pledged my official honor to my Canadian brethren that you will succeed"—and the writer believes that the Icelanders have redeemed the pledge of their noble friend.⁴⁵

Some version of Dufferin's involvement has been incorporated into almost every subsequent history of the Icelanders in North America.⁴⁶

Legal scholar Joseph T. Thorson addressed several of the silences of Jónasson's account in an address delivered to a Winnipeg audience during the 1920s.⁴⁷ Thorson was born in 1889 to Icelandic immigrants, and grew up primarily in Gimli and Winnipeg. He excelled at every academic level. He won a Rhodes scholarship in 1910, and was called to the Manitoba bar in 1913. After service in the First World War Thorson became Dean of the Manitoba Law School, a position he held until he was elected to Parliament in 1926.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Perhaps the first mention of Dufferin's involvement was in Guðlaugur Magnússon, "Landnam Íslendinga í Nýja Íslandi," in *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* (1899), 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9

⁴⁶ See Kristjanson, 26-27, Lindal 113, Arngrímsson, 125, and Thor, 81.

⁴⁷ J.T. Thorson, "The First Seven Years of the Icelandic Settlement in North America: A lecture delivered in Winnipeg in 1914," *The Icelandic Canadian Magazine*, 55, 3 (2000), 269. While the title claims this lecture was delivered in 1914, Thorson's comment that over 1000 Icelanders volunteered for service "during the late war" (p. 273) seems to indicate that it was delivered sometime during the interwar period.

⁴⁸ Kristjanson, 405, 412, 428.

Thorson's lecture on the Icelanders in North America included all the troubles that followed the founding of New Iceland. He shared the belief that New Iceland was a politico-cultural project for the preservation of the Icelandic language and culture, but argued that it was a fundamentally flawed vision doomed to failure. Thorson believed that New Iceland's failure was not to be lamented; it was a positive step on the road to greater things. In sharp contrast to Pétursson, Thorson argued that people of Icelandic descent should give up their dream of maintaining their language and culture. He asserted that the inescapable reality was that it would soon disappear, as the Icelanders became wholeheartedly assimilated. Assimilation, moreover, was a positive force that would open up new vistas for them: "[The Icelanders] have thrown in their lot with Canada and are taking their share in the building of our new nation."⁴⁹ He assured his audience that the Icelanders held qualities of great value for Canada, and urged them to be patient with other 'new Canadians' whose adaptation was slower. Far from being an alienated ethnic, Thorson was deeply committed to the assimilationist ideal of Canadian nationality. J.W. Dafoe, prominent editor of the Winnipeg Free Press, described him as "a thorough-going Canadian nationalist."⁵⁰

A prevailing political concern for demonstrating the worth of the Icelanders to Canada was a far subtler component of the next two examples of Icelandic-Canadian history writing in English. Remarkably, the University of Manitoba allowed two young Icelandic scholars to produce MA theses on virtually the same topic in the same year,

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ramsay Cook, ed., *The Dafoe-Sifton Correspondence, 1919-1928* (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen, 1966), 269.

with only minor differences in approach.⁵¹ Olöf Sigurdson included a longer section dedicated to the Icelandic background from Viking times to the emigration period.⁵² Her colleague Angantyr (Terry) Arnason differentiated his thesis by including several translations of source material as appendices.⁵³

The Arnason and Sigurdson theses are important for three reasons. First, they mark the beginning of scholarly attempts to synthesize the immigrant historical writing. Their account of migration and settlement is drawn almost entirely from the *Álmanak* settlement histories, and generally repeats their descriptive tone. Second, the Arnason and Sigurdson theses represent the earliest attempt to tell the Icelanders' story for an academic audience. Finally, whereas the immigrant histories largely omitted discussions of the Norse background—perhaps because knowledge of it was assumed—the Arnason and Sigurdson theses suggest a vital link between the Viking heritage and success in North America that later became a staple of Icelandic-Canadian historiography. Arnason wrote:

The old courage and fearlessness, the old spirit of adventure and love of freedom was still present [in the emigrants], but these qualities, which made their forefathers successful marauders have made these newcomers successful citizens of the two rich, great, and free nations, where they have made their homes.⁵⁴

The settlement accounts that Arnason and Sigurdson used as their sources sometimes made analogies between their experiences and the Norse explorations of the ninth and

⁵¹ Angantyr Arnason, "Icelandic Settlements in America" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1929); Olöf Sigurdson, "Icelandic Settlements in Manitoba and other points in America with a brief outline of Icelandic history" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1929).

⁵² Sigurdson, 1-23.

⁵³ "The purpose of the following introduction and documents is to make accessible to those who being interested in the story of the Icelanders in America, but who cannot read Icelandic..." Angantyr Arnason, Foreword. The appendices are mostly from *Framfari*, the first Icelandic newspaper in North America, and the *Álmanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson*. See 62-194.

⁵⁴ Angantyr Arnason, Foreword.

tenth centuries, but generally did not muse over the significance of that connection as a source of qualities that make Icelanders useful citizens in the new world.⁵⁵ Neijmann has identified this focus on the Viking Age as one of the myths common to the Icelanders in Canada. She believes it idealized and stereotyped the homeland in a way that allowed Western Icelanders to distance themselves from the painful memories and resentment over emigration in contemporary Iceland.⁵⁶ However, since this myth was developed by Icelandic-Canadians and Americans who were born in North America, and who were using it to demonstrate their value to their adopted homelands, this explanation seems inadequate.

Into the 1930s and 40s, this younger generation of Icelandic-Canadians sought to recognize the integration of their community into Canadian society by embracing the English language as a vehicle for disseminating Icelandic culture, rather than a threat to its preservation. One of the most significant events of this period was the founding of the Icelandic Canadian Club in 1938. This club was different from the Icelandic National League in that its meetings, events, and publications were in English rather than Icelandic. This was done out of the concern that, especially in urban Winnipeg, Icelandic culture was in danger of becoming irrelevant for young people who no longer spoke or read the language. In 1942, the club began publishing the English-language quarterly *The Icelandic Canadian*, an eclectic journal containing new and translated Icelandic history, fiction, and poetry, as well as community news and commentaries on current events. The founders of *The Icelandic Canadian* were correct in their assumption that in order to capture a younger audience the journal had to be in English. In the first few

⁵⁵ For example, see Erlendsson, 1.

⁵⁶ Neijmann, 77.

decades of its existence it gained a wide readership among people of Icelandic descent in both Canada and the United States.⁵⁷

The first editor-in-chief of *The Icelandic-Canadian* was Laura Goodman-Salverson, the first Icelandic-Canadian novelist to publish exclusively in English. Laura Goodman (Lára Guðmundsson) grew up primarily in the heart of Winnipeg's Icelandic west end, but due to her immigrant father's constant search for a better life also spent long periods in North Dakota, Minnesota, and even Mississippi. Her first novel *The Viking Heart* (1924) received widespread praise from Canadian literary critics, and subsequent novels in her early literary career were also well received. Her 1939 autobiography, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*, won the Governor General's Award for non-fiction.

Goodman-Salverson was not a historian, but the vision of the Icelandic-Canadian past, present, and future that she developed in her works was echoed in the later historical writings of her contemporaries. Her *Confessions* combined a gritty portrayal of the poverty and desperation of immigrant life with an idealized and glorified Icelandic past, and a hopeful prospectus for a bright Canadian future. She advocated the creation of a new nationality out of the best portions of the old ethnic heritages—a Canadian mosaic. As Neijmann states, “Laura was a pioneer in expressing this idea of a cultural mosaic through her fiction to the Canadian public at a time when most Canadians still entertained assimilationist ideas.”⁵⁸

The idea—and some would argue the reality—of an ethnic mosaic existed in the Canadian west long before the state adopted an official policy of multiculturalism in

⁵⁷ Kristjanson, 514-15.

⁵⁸ Neijmann, 179.

1971.⁵⁹ Goodman-Salverson's belief that immigrant cultures had something to offer Canada was shared by several prominent Canadian academics during the 1930s. Professor Watson Kirkconnell of Wesley College in Winnipeg attempted to draw attention to the literary heritage of the immigrant groups, especially the Icelanders and Ukrainians.⁶⁰ He gained his first impressions of the Icelanders through his three Icelandic colleagues at Wesley, Skuli Johnson, O.T. Anderson and Joseph Thorson. Kirkconnell was deeply impressed with the accomplishments of these men, and many of their countrymen. He later wrote, "The Icelanders are certainly one of the most articulate and cultural minded of all the nationality groups in Canada."⁶¹

Even those who completely rejected the idea of a Canadian cultural mosaic praised the Icelanders. Historian Arthur Lower, a colleague of Kirkconnell's at Wesley, denounced the introduction of large numbers of non-British immigrants into the Canadian west as dangerous to the cultural health of the young nation. He believed that the only way to create a true Canadian nationality was through a relatively homogeneous society.⁶² Lower considered the Icelanders to be the only group of 'new Canadians' to have contributed anything of value to their adopted home. "The Icelanders rate high on any count—literary figures, public men, judges, professors, have proceeded from this small, concentrated people."⁶³ He praised their willingness to acculturate, and their

⁵⁹ Ibid., 358.

⁶⁰ See Watson Kirkconnell, *The North American Book of Icelandic Verse* (New York: Isles, 1930).

⁶¹ Ibid., *A Slice of Canada: Memoirs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 264.

⁶² Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900*, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 129-131.

⁶³ Arthur Lower, *Canadians in the Making: A Social History of Canada* (Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1958), 376.

fervent Anglo-Canadian nationalism. Lower even claimed that a few among the Icelanders were “as good royalists as the head of any old Toronto family.”⁶⁴

Canadian nationalism was one of the most salient features of *The Icelandic Canadian* journal during its early years. Laura Goodman-Salverson’s debut editorial was a passionate wartime call for the greater integration of the Icelandic heritage into the Canadian national life:

What we owe to our ancestors is not worship but work. Not didactic eulogies upon the courage, the daring, the dreams that are dust, but dreams of our own sprung from that dust to show that their vision still lives in us....We believe that our first duty is to Canada and to the world of tomorrow. In that new world ethnic differences must not prevail as they have hitherto prevailed. Our divergent cultures must be freely spent in building a coordinated and greater civilization sincerely and sanely devoted to the common good of this country....Iceland will still live in our hearts; what is more, all that is good and great and treasureable in her ancient traditions will be transformed into living reality. As Canadians, and only as Canadians will it be possible to orient our Norse heritage in the New World of Tomorrow.⁶⁵

Icelandic-Canadian writers used this vision of Canadian nationality to reconcile their old ethnic loyalties with their new place as integrated members of a larger imagined national community.

Icelandic-Canadian historians discarded the older model of writing about the Icelanders *í Vesturheimi* in favour of studies detailing their contribution to the building of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Canada. These were commemorative volumes published with the assistance of provincial and federal governments. Walter J. Lindal’s *The Saskatchewan Icelanders: A Strand in the Canadian Fabric* (1955) was commissioned by the Saskatchewan government on the occasion of the province’s fiftieth anniversary and his *The Icelanders in Canada* (1967) was one of the early volumes in the “Canada

⁶⁴ Ibid., 377.

⁶⁵ Laura Goodman Salverson, “Editorial,” *The Icelandic Canadian*, 1, 1(October 1942), 2-3.

Ethnicia” centennial series sponsored by the federal government. A fellowship from the Manitoba Historical Society allowed Wilhelm Kristjanson to write *The Icelanders in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (1965) during the 1950s, and it was later published with the assistance of various Icelandic cultural organizations.⁶⁶ These histories also differed from earlier works in that they conform to the general contours of Canadian ethnic historiography during the period. Franca Iacovetta has observed that this monographic literature, almost always written by community leaders, often displayed a Whiggish and fileopietistic view of their groups’ history.⁶⁷

The adoption of this genre by the Icelandic-Canadian historians Walter Lindal and Wilhelm Kristjanson was not motivated solely by publisher’s guidelines or the strictures of any particular series. It was representative of how they understood the place of their ethnic community in Canadian society. Far from feeling alienated from Canadian society, Lindal and Kristjanson demonstrated a profound affection for the country in which they had grown up and been educated, and were actively engaged in the social, cultural, and political life of Canada. They were among the Icelandic community’s intellectual elite, having both studied at post-secondary institutions in Manitoba and distinguished themselves in their respective fields. During the First World War, they were officers in the Canadian military.⁶⁸ Kristjanson attended Oxford on an IODE scholarship, and later worked for the Manitoba Department of Education. Lindal had a distinguished legal career, including many years spent as a Manitoba County Court judge.

⁶⁶ Kristjanson’s manuscript was completed in the 1950s, but not published until 1965. Typescripts of early versions are located at the Archives of Manitoba (henceforth AM), Wilhelm Kristjanson, MG9 A79.

⁶⁷ Franca Iacovetta, *The Writing of English Canadian Immigrant History* (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1997), 3.

⁶⁸ Jón Sigurðsson Félagið IODE, 89, 177, 209.

Lindal and Kristjanson's history writing revised and expanded myths developed by their predecessors. Þorsteinsson, in particular, was an important influence on their writing. They admired his skilful rendering of a complex history, and shared his view that the Icelandic heritage had predisposed the emigrants to accomplish great things.

Lindal, however, sought to qualify the work of the old master in one very important and revealing respect. He took issue with Þorsteinsson's description of the Icelandic background, and the reasons for emigration, openly criticized the long narration of Icelandic disasters that appeared in the first volume of the *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*. Lindal flatly rejected the claim that environmental cataclysms and poverty were the factors stimulating emigration, and argued that physical hardship was only a minor contributor to the emigration movement.⁶⁹ He instead chose to appeal to the more positive myth that compared the beginning of emigration to the trans-Atlantic migrations of the Vikings a thousand years earlier.⁷⁰ Lindal claimed that the emigration was caused less by hardship and distress than by *útþrá*—the uncontrollable desire to reach beyond inherited from the Vikings.⁷¹ However, he still saw the need to demonstrate that an active decision to leave did not imply a lessening of affection for the homeland:

The love of Iceland and her people, of their language and their story, was just as strong in those who left as in those who did not leave. That is fully borne out by everything the Icelandic immigrants did and thought from the moment they stepped ashore on the other side of the Atlantic.⁷²

The thesis of Lindal's *The Icelanders in Canada* was that a distinctive "Icelandic mind" had been created out of the peculiar circumstances of Iceland's historical development.

⁶⁹ Lindal, 76.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

This type of mind, shared by all Icelanders, was the result of both heredity and environment. It had its beginnings in the freedom-obsessed Vikings who migrated to Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries and was forged through the rigours of environmental adversity, the island's isolation, and the influence of its rich literary tradition.⁷³ In Lindal's view, the Icelanders' understanding of their own heritage imbued them with a feeling of destiny that spurred them on to live up to the high standards of achievement defined within their nation by the great deeds of the past. When the Icelanders emigrated, the Icelandic mind was brought to bear on Canada, resulting in great rewards both for them and for their country of adoption. In articulating this idea, Lindal was attempting to reconcile the continuity that Þorsteinsson believed existed between Iceland and North America, with the reality of acculturation. Lindal's sometimes bizarre concept of the distinctive Icelandic mind allowed him to claim that even if there were the outward signs of discontinuity, such as abandonment of Icelandic as the mother tongue, the best qualities of the Icelandic heritage still resided within people of Icelandic descent in some inalienable way.⁷⁴

The different explanations of why the Icelanders emigrated put forward by Þorsteinsson and Lindal have embedded within them a degree of fatalism. Migrants were 'pushed' either by an inhospitable environment or by an internal impulse inherited from their ancestors. Nonetheless, being compelled by an inward drive to seek out freedom and opportunity entails a more active response than the fundamentally reactive stance of leaving only after circumstances have rendered emigration the only viable option. That Lindal should cite drive and ambition as the dominant motivation of the emigrants is a

⁷³ Ibid., 55-57.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 212, 381, 409.

reflection of how he constructed the overarching narrative of the Icelanders in Canada. In his view, the migrants' decision to leave their beloved homeland was ultimately positive because it resulted in their offering the best of the Icelandic heritage to the building of a new Canadian nation.⁷⁵

Kristjanson and Lindal both repeat Pétursson's assertions about the desire of the Icelanders to form a united settlement in the new world. They repeat the story of the Icelandic 'Covenant' but give it a somewhat different emphasis. Whereas Pétursson interpreted it as a declaration that the Icelanders would work to maintain their language and nationality, Lindal and Kristjanson imbue it with the status of a founding moment, tying forever the destiny of the Icelanders in North America to Canada rather than to the United States.⁷⁶ Other stories, such as Lord Dufferin's intercession, were used in the same manner as in Jónasson's 1901 address—to prove that from the very beginning, prominent Canadians had seen the potential contribution that the Icelanders could make to Canadian nation-building.

Kristjanson and Lindal constructed the Icelandic-Canadian past in much the same way as Goodman-Salverson had in her fiction—an idealized Icelandic past, a harsh immigrant apprenticeship, and a successful integration into a new nation with a glorious future. In the conclusion to *The Icelanders in Manitoba*, Kristjanson attempted to come to terms with the meaning of Icelandic ethnic identity by adopting the mosaic view. He saw inward cultural retention and outward assimilation as being mutually complementary:

A story has been told of Icelandic people in Manitoba. It is also a chapter in the story of the Canadian people as a whole, and would be recognized as such by the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 465-467.

⁷⁶ Kristjanson, 103.

pioneers, who, while cherishing their Icelandic heritage, gave their love and loyalty to Canada. The heritage which they treasured they hoped would become a part of the common, enriched heritage of their new homeland.⁷⁷

Lindal, too, believed that the correct vision of Canadian nationality was a multicultural mosaic. In 1958 he gave a speech titled "The Content of Canadianism" at a dinner given in honour of newly appointed Icelandic-Canadian Senator G.S. Thorvaldson in which he argued that liberalism, defined as tolerance of ethnic difference and the laissez-faire style selection of the best parts of varied heritages, should be the cornerstone of what is meant by Canadian nationality:

It is the co-mingling of the best in the heritage with the best that can be drawn from the milieu, the immediate surroundings, which makes its impress on the national mold, and thus helps determine the qualities of citizenship.⁷⁸

During the 1960s Lindal lobbied the federal government extensively to have the contributions of Canada's ethnic groups officially acknowledged. He made a presentation on the subject to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism when it visited Winnipeg in May 1965 in his capacity as a representative of the Canadian Ethnic Press Federation for *The Icelandic Canadian*.⁷⁹

Lindal constructed his vision of the Icelandic-Canadian past with his ideas about the place of his ethnic group in Canada very much in mind. It is difficult to imagine that Judge Walter J. Lindal, who identified himself as Canadian above all else, could have been motivated by a sense of alienation from an intolerant Canadian society. Nor is it likely that he—having been brought over from Iceland as an infant—wrote his histories primarily with a view to redressing the hard feelings over emigration that lingered in

⁷⁷ Ibid., 519.

⁷⁸ AM, MG 14, B 78, Walter J. Lindal Correspondence, 1961-1968.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Iceland. Yet these are the reasons that Neijmann and Wolf cite for the formulation of myths among writers of Lindal's generation.

The myths that Neijmann and Wolf identify are present in the historiography of the Icelanders in Canada. However, they are not static and timeless, but the product of specific historic circumstances. The motivations that Neijmann and Wolf feel are central to the myth-makers are far more compelling when discussing Western Icelandic writers such as Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson and Rögnvaldur Pétursson who wrote in Icelandic and addressed an Icelandic audience. They sought to emphasize continuing links with Iceland, and the high regard in which the emigrants held the language and culture of their homeland. The myths that Western Icelandic writers constructed were repeated, but not accepted uncritically, by later writers re-examining the past in order to find new meanings. In sharp contrast to the earlier generation, the first Canadian-raised generation demonstrated an overwhelming desire to demonstrate the value of the Icelandic heritage to the building of the Canadian nation. The Icelandic immigrant past has thus been marshalled in the cause of constructing ethnic and national identities, but these constructions have been contingent on the perspectives and purposes of the writers.

CONCLUSION

Sigtryggur Jónasson left Iceland alone and reached Quebec City on September 12, 1872. He had made up his mind to explore the possibility of establishing an Icelandic settlement in Canada. On the ship he met a Scotsman who gave him two good bits of advice: do not drink the water from the St. Lawrence without a “wee drop” of Scotch whiskey in it, and go to Ontario. The budding Canadian accepted both bits of advice.¹

In searching for the historic roots of their community in Canada, Icelandic-Canadian historians Walter J. Lindal and Wilhelm Kristjanson considered several founding moments to be of particular significance. Prominent among these were the arrival of the first Icelander in Canada, the decision of the *St. Patrick* immigrants to settle in Ontario, and the establishment of the New Iceland colony on the shores of Lake Winnipeg.

Sigtryggur Jónasson played a vital role in all three of these events: he was the first Icelander to settle in Canada in 1872, the translator and guide who brought the *St. Patrick* Icelanders to Kinmount in 1874, and a member of the deputation that selected the Lake Winnipeg colony site in the summer of 1875. In the fall of that year, Jónasson also became the first return migrant among the Icelanders in Canada when he was sent home as an emigration agent of the Canadian government.² In the ensuing years he served as one of the intellectual and business leaders of New Iceland in good times and bad, and was the first Icelander to be elected to the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. Reflecting on the significance of Jónasson’s career a generation later, Icelandic-Canadian historians gave him the title ‘Father of Icelandic Settlement in Canada’ and ‘Father of New

¹ Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Ottawa: National Printers, 1967), 90.

² National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Records of the Department of Agriculture, RG17, A I 2, vol. 1512, p. 1, John Lowe to Sigtryggur Jónasson, 15 September 1875.

Iceland'.³ An examination of his migration story, and how later historians have reconstructed it, provide an appropriate entrée into a summation of what this study of Icelandic migration, myth, and identity has accomplished.

A twenty-year-old Jónasson arrived in Quebec City on 26 September 1872, the lone Icelander aboard the Allan Line steamer *St. Andrew*.⁴ Sources in Iceland list his occupation as a labourer, but that description does not truly reflect his level of education and experience.⁵ Since he was a boy, Sigtryggur had worked in the home of district governor Pétur Hafstein at the administrative centre of Möðruvellir in Eyjafjarðarsýsla. From the age of fifteen, he had been employed as a secretary-in-training, receiving instruction in mathematics, accounting, and Danish, and familiarizing himself with a variety of legal and administrative procedures. The Governor's daughter Þórunn had spent time in England, and it was through Sigtryggur's friendship with her that he gained a working knowledge of English. When Governor Hafstein was removed from office in 1870, Sigtryggur accompanied his former employer to Ytri-Skjaldarvík on the coast of Eyjafjörður where he worked as a hired man until his departure for North America two years later.⁶

Sigtryggur seems to have changed his mind about his North American destination either during the voyage or shortly after his arrival. The *St. Andrew* ship's list records his destination as Chicago, a choice perhaps influenced by a lengthy article about that city that had recently appeared in the Akureyri newspaper *Norðanfari*.⁷ However, the check

³ Lindal, 85.

⁴ *The Globe*, 28 Sept. 1872; Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), Records of the Department of Immigration, RG 11-17, p. 62, Emigrant Arrival and Destination Records, 1862-1881.

⁵; Jónius H. Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of the Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983).

⁶ Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985), 221-222.

⁷ *Norðanfari*, 29 January 1872.

mark beside his name indicates that he declared his intention of staying in Canada to the immigration officials at Quebec.⁸ Jónasson travelled to Kingston and then on to Toronto where he applied for assistance at the emigration office on 30 September.⁹

Speaking on the subject of the early Icelandic settlements in Canada to a meeting of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society in 1901, a forty-nine year old Jónasson reflected on his decision to stay in Canada when all other Icelandic migrants were headed for the United States. He made no mention of intending to go to Chicago, but stated that when he left Iceland he was undecided as to where he would settle, and had resolved to see some of Canada to begin with. On board the ship he met an elderly Scot who assured him that Ontario was the best part not only of Canada, but of the whole North American continent.¹⁰

Subsequent generations of Icelandic-Canadians continued to elaborate on the reasons for Jónasson's emigration, and on why he chose Canada. They asserted that Canada was his destination even before he left Iceland. Water J. Lindal emphasized that it was not economics, but an intellectual desire that prompted his decision to leave. In Lindal's view, Sigtryggur went to Canada after studying various forms of government while working at Möðruvellir. During the 1930s, the octogenarian 'Father of New Iceland' told Lindal, "I went to Canada because I liked the British form of government better than the American."¹¹ Lindal stated that this preference for constitutional monarchy over republicanism was the reason that Jónasson had always cited for his

⁸ NAC, Records of the Department of Immigration, RG 76, reel C-4527, Quebec Passenger Lists, 13 Sept 1871-27 Oct. 1872.

⁹ AO, RG 11-3, Toronto Emigration Office Assisted Immigrant Registers, 1865-1874.

¹⁰ Sigtryggur Jónasson, *The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press Company, 1901), 5.

¹¹ Lindal, 88.

decision to stay in Canada. This motivation was, however, notably absent from Jónasson's 1901 address to Winnipeg's intellectual elite. It seems that even Jónasson himself was involved in a process of re-imagining the significance of his own migration.

This brief account of the genesis and evolution of Sigtryggur Jónasson's story is representative of the larger purpose to which this study has been dedicated. For over a century, authors of Icelandic descent have been involved in a process of mining the past for themes and images useful for defining ethnic and national identities in the present. This has resulted in the creation of myths about the group's past that tell us just as much about the contemporary concerns of the historians who created them as they do about the events they describe. This study has had a dual purpose. The first has been to develop a new perspective that integrates the story of Icelandic immigration to Canada between 1872 and 1875 into broader global and local contexts, using previously neglected sources external to the group itself. Mythic narratives often display a blinkered focus on the Icelanders that leaves silent the broader context into which their experience fits. The second purpose has been to deconstruct several of the most common mythic stories about leaving home, travelling, sojourning, and settling that have appeared in Icelandic ethnic writings, and to understand the process by which these stories were constructed and used by people of Icelandic descent in Canada to forge ethnic and national identities. The result has been a more textured view of the construction and uses of myths by Icelandic ethnic historians over two generations.

Contrary to the mythic version, the beginning of emigration from Iceland was not caused by a sudden cataclysm, such as an erupting volcano—chronology denies this—or an internal drive for freedom among the Icelanders. It was precipitated instead by

economic and demographic pressures on the Icelandic population after 1850. Virulent epidemics of smallpox, a colder climate, a major volcanic eruption and subsequent famine plagued Iceland during the eighteenth century. The first half of the nineteenth century was, by contrast, a period of relative prosperity in which Iceland's economy and population expanded considerably. However, this upswing was built on the old methods of agriculture that had been subject to climatic fluctuations in centuries past, and when adverse conditions returned around 1850 the generation that had been born during the good times was faced with diminished opportunities. Structural inertia of Icelandic rural society slowed the movement of the excess population into the fishery—the area of Iceland's economy with the greatest potential for growth—and set the stage for emigration. Still, far more adverse conditions had prevailed in the previous century without resulting in emigration. The difference was that by the early 1870s two key obstacles—insufficient information about overseas destinations and lack of transport—had largely been removed through an increased flow of ideas and information from the colonial metropole of Copenhagen, and the greater integration of Iceland into the Atlantic economy after 1855.

The initial swells of mass migration from Iceland to Canada arose at a time when most European migrants, especially Scandinavians, were headed for the United States. Historians of Icelandic descent traditionally have argued that it was the result of special terms that the Icelanders laid before Canadian authorities, or the intervention of their noble patron Lord Dufferin, that resulted in Canada becoming the favoured destination. However, Dufferin's role was marginal, and the special conditions were in fact a form of government-imposed indenture binding the Icelanders to settle in Canada as a condition

of their assisted passage. It was the fitful but advancing integration of the island into the globalizing economy of the late nineteenth century, combined with aggressive recruiting efforts by the Allan steamship line, and the governments of Canada and Ontario, that resulted in the first mass migrations being directed to Canada in 1873 and 1874.

Increased exports of sheep and horses to Scotland provided emigrants with the opportunity to convert their assets into cash, and facilitated the first leg of their journey. By travelling via Scotland, the Icelanders were brought into a migration stream that had been bringing people to Canada for most of the nineteenth century. The Canadian-subsidized Allan Steamship Line sought Icelandic passengers as part of an expansion into previously untapped markets.

The Dominion of Canada and Ontario provincial government offered generous subsidies because of the inability of traditional sources of immigration—particularly in Britain—to meet the Canadian demand for agricultural labourers, and female domestic servants. The Icelandic families were recruited as settlers to help develop the rough-hewn frontier of Ontario as part of the province's ill-conceived plans for fostering agriculture on the Precambrian shield. In 1874, Ontario officials used Icelandic men as navvies to push rail lines north, in hopes that they would use their wages to earn the necessary funds for pioneering on adjacent free grant land.

With the exception of the tiny enclave in Cardwell township that later became known as 'Hekklá', the Icelandic settlements in Ontario were abandoned due to the poor quality of land, and a paucity of employment opportunities at a time of commercial depression. Historians have sometimes miscast the Icelanders' failure as the inevitable result of a patriotic unwillingness to adapt to new conditions, and an overwhelming desire

to form an isolated rural settlement where they could preserve their language and culture for all time.¹² The analysis here has sought to demonstrate that economic reasons more than any other factor explain why the Ontario experiments failed. The Icelanders actively responded to demands in the labour market and sought out a range of other opportunities there. They showed an eagerness to learn English and to learn new skills necessary for life in Canada while at the same time attempting to maintain their old world social networks.

Most traditional narratives interpret the Ontario settlements as failed experiments in a self-conscious search for an exclusive Icelandic colony. This interpretation traces the origins of a New Iceland ideal through the writings of several prominent leaders, and assumes that all the Icelandic settlers shared, in some form, the same politico-cultural vision of founding a united Icelandic homeland in North America. Several settlement attempts across the continent are posited as failed ventures in a search that came to an end with the founding of 'New Iceland'—an exclusively Icelandic colony—on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in 1875, through the successful intervention of the Icelanders' noble patron Lord Dufferin.

However, the initiative to grant the colony was taken by the Canadian Government as part of a larger strategy for settling its vast Northwest Territories, and following a policy of bloc settlements already successfully implemented elsewhere in the region. Lord Dufferin played almost no role in the colony's creation as he was out of the country for the entire period in which the Canadian government took steps to move the Icelanders from Ontario to the Northwest. That many of the migrants responded

¹² See George Houser, *Pioneer Icelandic Pastor: The Life of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society, 1990), 101.

favourably to the chance to escape dire poverty in Ontario and to be reunited with family, friends, neighbours, and fellow countrymen is by no means remarkable or surprising. This was typical of immigrant survival strategies for coping with new world circumstances but did not preclude some measure of acculturation to the social and economic norms of the host society. Nor is it evidence that the majority shared the nationalist cultural and political goals of some of their most prominent leaders.

The creators of mythic narratives about the Icelandic experience in Canada were attempting to come to terms with their community's physical and intellectual separation from Iceland, and its growing integration into Anglo-Canadian society. They used the past to define the meaning of an Icelandic ethnic identity in Canada, and the relationship of that identity to the larger national communities of Iceland and Canada. There was an important difference between the historical imaginings of the immigrant and Canadian-born generations that is not addressed by literary scholar Daisy Neijmann in exploring the role of myth in the Icelandic community. The immigrant generation wrote in Icelandic and focussed on the desire of the Icelanders to preserve their language and culture in the new world. Their rendition of the past emphasized how the decision to leave was not a denial of immigrants' love of their homeland. Immigrant writers such as Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson who had grown up in Iceland sought to deflect charges that emigration was a betrayal of national interest, and attempted to work through the difficult personal implications of leaving home in their telling of the Icelandic migration and settlement story.

The Canadian-born generation also valued their Icelandic heritage, believing that all Icelandic-Canadians held the memory of their homeland close to their hearts. But for

people who had been born or spent their formative years in Canada, that memory was not formed from personal experience, but handed down from literature, and the stories of the older generation. Iceland, therefore, played a much different role in constructions of the past primarily concerned with the Icelandic-Canadian's real and potential contributions to the social and economic life of Canada. They wrote in English and attempted to legitimate their foundation myths to Canadian and Icelandic-Canadian audiences by advocating a vision of Canadian nationality as an integrated tapestry that incorporated the best aspects of Canada's many ethnic heritages. Their reading of history left little doubt that the Icelandic heritage had much to contribute.

This study is confined to the period between the beginning of Icelandic immigration to Canada in 1872, and the founding of the New Iceland settlement in 1875. The subsequent history of the Icelanders in North America deserves a new look based on the approach used here. Too often, historians writing on the subject have chosen to use the same sources, to reiterate the same mythic interpretations, and to ignore the broader contexts that promote a greater understanding of events. The approach developed here emphasizes the importance of a greater contextualization of the Icelandic story by incorporating perspectives and sources from both the sending and receiving societies, as well as those of the migrants themselves. Such explorations into the history of Icelandic migration and settlement have the potential to expose more silences in the traditional narratives, and to reveal the underlying assumptions and purposes that have influenced how people of Icelandic descent have constructed their migrant past.

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