

THE THIRTEENTH HERMANN PÁLSSON LECTURE (2017)

Vestur – Íslendingar: the Icelanders of Manitoba

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IT IS A great honour to have been invited by the *Scottish Society for Northern Studies* to deliver this year's Hermann Pálsson Memorial Lecture. Hermann was a very good friend and colleague throughout my years at the University of Edinburgh and I rank Stella, his wife, Steinvör, his daughter, and Helena, his grand-daughter, among my close friends now.

Let me rehearse a few details about Hermann's life for those here who did not have the privilege of knowing him in person as well as those of us who did. He was born in 1921 at a farm in the north of Iceland, Sauthanes á Ásum, near Blönduós and the Húnafljörður. He was the sixth in a family of twelve children and lost his father at a young age. The family was not rich in material ways but valued education highly. Hermann gained a degree in Icelandic Studies at the University of Reykjavik in 1947 and went on from there to study for another degree, in Irish Studies, at the National University of Ireland, in University College Dublin. He soon learned Welsh as well, some of it by total immersion in a Welsh-speaking community in Gwynedd.

Angus McIntosh (1914-2005) had been appointed to the new Forbes Chair of English Language and General Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh in 1948 and he appointed Hermann to a Lectureship in 1950. The School of Scottish Studies, in whose creation McIntosh was centrally involved, was coming into being at just that time and Hermann took a keen interest in it, retaining a strong affection for the School and its activities and a love of the Gaelic language and Celtic tradition.

His first two publications were a volume of Irish tales and a book about the Gaelic-Norse culture of the Hebrides, drawing extensively on their poetry, both translated into Icelandic. Later in his career (1996) came a volume on the impact on the Celts on Icelandic literature and culture. He looked to the

culture of continental Europe, including works of humanism, for influences on Old Norse literature as well, initiating in 1971 the first of the now-triennial International Saga Conferences on the theme of 'The Icelandic Sagas and Western Literary Tradition'. He was given a personal chair in Icelandic Studies in 1982 and on his retirement in 1988 became an Honorary Fellow in Scandinavian Studies.

Hermann was a genial and generous teacher and scholar, publishing books, editions and articles throughout his life and, importantly, collaborating with Magnus Magnusson and Paul Edwards, with the help of others, in translating many of the Icelandic sagas into English in paperback editions, making them widely accessible to the interested reader. He encouraged many to explore the northern world and was a founding member of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies and a valued office-bearer.

His death in 2002 took away a man who was much loved and respected for the breadth and depth of his scholarship, who had placed Old Norse Studies on the international map in new and fascinating ways. It was for all these reasons that the Society instituted this annual memorial lecture as a celebration of his life and his work.

I was looking forward to meeting, and perhaps studying with, Hermann Pálsson when in 1967 – fifty years ago this year – I came to the University of Edinburgh for what I thought then would be one year of postgraduate study. But this was not to be – at least not that year – for Hermann and his family had gone to Canada for the year and to the University of Toronto, my alma mater! Nevertheless, I was well-schooled in Old Norse that year by O K Schram and Margaret Orme and I was still here to meet the Pálssons when they returned in 1968.

I confess that when the Society's invitation reached me I was uncertain about an appropriate topic. I have many links with Scandinavia which I value but my own research has not drawn extensively on material from the north. But I remembered Hermann's interest in the Icelandic element in Canadian society and that this year is the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation in 1867, though of course Canada is much older than this as the home of our indigenous First Nations and Inuit people and the French populations of Quebec and the Maritime Provinces. And so today I want to take you to Canada.

As a child growing up in the multi-ethnic city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, I had class-mates at school with Icelandic surnames. Later I was to undertake research and field work in the neighbouring province of Manitoba among the descendants of 19th century settlers who originated in the island of Tíre in the Hebrides. They lived not far from the townships where Icelandic emigrants



Figure 1: Map showing places of Icelandic settlement.

had made their homes. But for this lecture, which is an overview of a subject, I am indebted to the recording and research and writing of others.

Say the words 'Canada' and 'Icelandic settlement' and the place-name L'Anse-aux-Meadows at the far eastern extremity of the country comes to mind, a cove by which lies the site of significant excavations and discoveries in the 1960s and the decades after by Norwegians Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine Ingstad, he an explorer, she an archaeologist. Although 'meadows' is an appropriate enough term for this World Heritage Site, the name has nothing to do with grassy expanses but may refer to a ship called 'La Meduse' which might have foundered there or to a type of jellyfish found in its waters, 'Meduses'.

Its eight complete buildings about one thousand years old, both dwellings and workshops, form the only confirmed Norse site in North America, though on Baffin Island in the Arctic recent finds suggest that there may have been a Norse outpost there. It has been suggested, on the basis of finds made and not made at L'Anse-aux-Meadows, that it may have been a temporary boat repair post rather than a permanent settlement.

But our story takes place inland, thousands of miles further west, briefly in what became the province of Ontario and then beyond in what we now know as the province of Manitoba and a region called the Interlake, but known earlier as New Iceland (Nya Island) with its main focus in Gimli, 'the home of the gods'.

The key date here is 1875, although some emigration had taken place from Iceland before then. This was not extensive, however, and was limited to scattered localities in several states of the USA: Utah, Illinois and Wisconsin.

The twin factors of 'push' and 'pull' pertained: at home there were economic difficulties to escape and in the New World the promise of good agricultural land and other attractive incentives. In 1875 the eruption of the volcano Askja rendered useless a large expanse of agricultural land in central Iceland. This was the catalyst for a major wave of emigration which is estimated to have taken up to 20% of the Icelandic population west.

Sigtryggur Jonasson, who came to be known as 'The Father of New Iceland', had left in 1872 as a young man in his twenties with the intention of settling in Canada, before the volcano erupted. He learned English and quickly assumed a leadership role, returning home and distributing a leaflet from the Canadian Government, *Nya Island i Kanada*, which outlined the opportunities open to settlers. The Allan Shipping Line, a Scottish company, established an agency in Iceland in 1873, ensuring that Canada became a destination in preference to the USA. In that year a group of one hundred emigrants left Iceland for North America, half of them heading for Wisconsin but the rest intending to settle in what was to become Ontario. The following year 365 further people spent a very difficult winter in Kinmount in that province. The land was rocky and poor and the community did not thrive there, though their brief stay is commemorated by a historic plaque in the locality.

The Icelanders sought a place where they could prosper, maintain their traditions and be free of the threat of natural disasters. The Governor General of the new Dominion of Canada, Lord Dufferin, intervened, assisted by a Scottish missionary by the name of John Taylor, who had become a Canadian Government Immigration agent. Dufferin had visited Iceland and felt that he knew the calibre of its people. He ensured that the emigrants were offered a tract of land in the Keewatin District of what was still known as 'The Great North-West' on the western side of Lake Winnipeg. The boundaries of the province of Manitoba, which came into Canadian Confederation in 1870, were still expanding to the west and were not finally set until 1912.

He saw that they received the credit necessary to make a start in their new homes. In 1875, 235 Icelanders headed west with those leaving Ontario and the following year 1200 went directly from Iceland. More followed. Some of the men preferred to stay in the growing settlement of Winnipeg, now the capital of the province. In time it attracted more Icelanders and became the first permanent urban Icelandic settlement in North America. The majority, however, went on to the area they were to call New Iceland, with Gimli as its main focus. Other townships in the Icelandic Reserve were Lundar, Baldur, Riverton, Lakeview and Erickson. As land became available further west on the basis of attractive homesteading offers, some families took up land in what would become in 1905 the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta, but these



Figure 2: Log cabins in winter (N8336), Archives of Manitoba, Gisli Goodman collection 147.

numbers were relatively small. It was Gimli in New Iceland that retained its critical Icelandic mass.

The first years were far from easy. An epidemic of smallpox, contracted at the immigration facilities at Quebec, their first landfall in Canada, reduced their numbers considerably in 1876/77, but the community did manage to establish itself. Almost immediately, a newspaper written in longhand began to appear, taken from house to house on foot, while 1877 saw the start of a properly published and printed paper, *Framfari* ('Progress'). It appeared twice a month and carried announcements, local news, letters, reports of interest to the settlers and articles on Canadian and world events, some original and some translated from other sources. Between 1879 and 1910, eight other publications originated in Gimli including *Heimskringla* ('The World') in 1886 and, partly in opposition, *Logberg* ('The Tribune') in 1887, both in Icelandic. These amalgamated in 1959, using both names; by then it was an English-language paper. Others undertook to chronicle the life of the community in personal logs.

New Iceland had in its early years a political structure unique in Canadian history, for it governed itself for its first twelve years with a constitution which named the colony Vatnsthing (Lake District). This was divided into four parts, not unlike the ancient divisions of Iceland: Vidinesbyggd (Willow Point District), Arnesbyggd (Arnes District), Flotsbyggd (River District) and Mikleyjarbyggd (Big Island District). Each elected a council of five members by popular vote and a regional council of six members, called the Thingrad, administered the general affairs of the colony and represented the people in interactions with the provincial and Canadian government. Municipal government was established elsewhere in the province in 1881 and accepted in New Iceland / Vatnsthing in 1887.

In this connection it is interesting to note that there was criticism of the trend to emigration in Iceland, some going as far as to brand the emigrants as traitors to the cause of working for Icelandic independence. A question to be asked is whether emigration was seen by those leaving as an opportunity to put into practice in a new homeland something for which the old still yearned. Iceland was granted a constitution in 1874 and these matters must have been on the minds of many people at the time.

The economic basis of New Iceland was a mixed one. There was farming and scope for rearing livestock. Logging offered seasonal work and resources for housebuilding. Hunting was a pastime as well as a necessity; game, birds and small animals were plentiful. The lake and fishing in it proved a lucrative source of food and income.

Schools were established quickly; in fact Susan Taylor, a niece of the immigration agent John Taylor, was one of the early teachers in the community. The University of Manitoba, founded in 1877, accepted Icelandic as a second language for incoming students. In 1901 the Manitoba Department of Education approved the teaching of Icelandic in provincial schools if requested by parents. Religious life was served by Lutheran and Unitarian pastors and could be a cause of dissent. One pastor led an exodus of some families across the border to North Dakota in the USA in 1879.

Reading and reciting Bible stories and sagas are reported as pastimes in the home. Books were among the items brought out from Iceland by many of the settlers, who also wrote home requesting them. One pioneer donated a hundred books of his own when the first public library was established in Gimli. Communal socialising was regular; rites of passage in the human life cycle and the cycle of the year and the seasons were marked. The New Year bonfire featured the old year symbolised by a man in a rabbit-fur beard holding an empty bottle and glass ousted by a young man appearing from the east.



Figure 3: Icelandic pioneer woman spinning, ca 1905 (N11492), Archives of Manitoba, New Iceland collection 507.

The closed world of the tract reserved exclusively for Icelanders was to alter when Municipality Status replaced the earlier entity known as the Vatnsthing in 1887. The project of settling the Icelanders in Manitoba by the Canadian government, using home-language pamphlets and transport agents as well as immigration employees, provided a very useful model for recruitment elsewhere. In several stages western Canada was to be populated by people from many parts of Europe. Group migration schemes brought Ukrainians into the area as well as settlers from Scotland and elsewhere. Gimli retained its distinctive socio-cultural qualities nevertheless. It is not until 1908 that the yearly list of reeve and four rural municipality officials is not 100% Icelandic, when Ukrainian, Polish, German and other names begin to appear. The town officials, mayor and councillors, from 1908 to 1924, are all Icelanders. In 1925 and 1926 a Hector M McGinnis makes an appearance and becomes mayor for four yearly terms from 1927 and again from 1938 to 1946. Barney A Egilson took the reins from 1947 to 1962. And so on, a mix illustrating the 'Canadian mosaic' in the phrase coined by John Murray Gibbon, the Canadian Pacific Railway publicity director, in 1938.

It is important to remember that these lands had not been empty; they had been home and hunting territory for several First Nations groups for centuries. The story of their interaction with European settlers is for another day.

It was not long before the West Icelanders became involved in wider public life. In 1896 Sigtryggur Jonasson, 'The Father of New Iceland', became a member of the Manitoba Provincial Legislature, the first Icelandic in Canada to hold public office of this kind. Margaret Benedictson, editor of the women's magazine *Freyja* from 1898 to 1910, formed the first women's suffrage society in Winnipeg in 1908. In 1915 Thomas H Johnson was appointed Attorney General of Manitoba, thus becoming the first Icelandic cabinet minister in Canada.

The opening of a railway line from Winnipeg to Gimli in 1906 had a considerable impact on the local economy. Commercial fishermen were able to service markets farther from home. The railway gave access by city-dwellers with leisure time to the beaches along the shores of Lake Winnipeg, attracting large numbers of trippers out for a day as well as those wishing holiday accommodation to rent or to buy. The building of summer cottages opened up new income streams for local men, while providing and servicing facilities for summer visitors gave employment to women as well. Oli Thorsteinson was a carpenter and contractor as well as a fiddle maker and teacher who built one of the first dance pavilions there and contributed to the entertainment as well.

World War One was a defining moment for perceptions of Canada abroad and the development of a Canadian identity at home as the country emerged to play a role on the international scene in its own right. The Canadian Expeditionary Force saw action in several areas of conflict on the Western Front. It provided opportunities for people from many different backgrounds, but often with shared experiences in the young country, to get acquainted and find commonalities. Just under a thousand Icelanders (989) fought with the Canadian forces, 256 with those of the USA. Of the former, 391 were born in Iceland, the rest in Canada. Fourteen women served as nurses. One hundred and forty-four of the combatants perished.

In the century since, much has been done to document and describe the Icelandic-Canadian experience in Canada, much of it with a focus on New Iceland. Works of poetry and fiction contribute to this wealth. First-hand accounts, as outlined above, were often committed to print from the early days of the settlement. Letters home to Iceland and other archive sources have proved invaluable to historians. Many individual family histories have been compiled and community websites abound. Accounts of lived experience have also been collected over the years, including those gathered by W J Sisler in the 1940s, who took an interest in the Icelandic settlement when a teacher on Winnipeg's north side, where there were many Icelandic pupils. The wealth of material relating to the settlement makes New Iceland an excellent focus for research probing bigger themes and issues in relation to culture transfer and a

current Leverhulme-funded project in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Aberdeen is engaged in this.

Several authors of Icelandic origin must be included here. The poet and farmer who called himself Stephan Gudmundur Stephansson was born in 1853 in Skagafjorthur in Iceland and emigrated in 1873 to Wisconsin. From there he moved on in 1889 to Markerville in present-day Alberta, when land became available there. He did not see Iceland again until 1917 and died ten years later but is regarded as one of its outstanding writers. He wrote only in Icelandic. His poems are available in six volumes as *Andookur* (Wakeful Nights) and his letters and essays in four volumes.

Winnipeg-born Laura Goodman Salverson (1890-1970) twice won the Governor-General's Prize, once for a novel based on the experiences of Icelandic settlers and once for her autobiography, *Confessions of an Emigrant's Daughter*. She wrote in English and was also co-founder of the magazine *Icelandic-Canadian*, now known as *Icelandic Connection*. William Dempsey Valgardson was born in 1939 in Winnipeg and raised in Gimli. A novelist, short story writer and poet, he has drawn on the Icelandic-Canadian experience in plays, radio and film scripts, some for Icelandic media. David Arnason was born in Gimli in 1940 and is a poet, author and historian extensively engaged with Icelandic-Canadian themes.

Kristjana Gunnars was born in 1948 in Reykjavik and experienced emigration herself, coming first to Oregon with her parents when her father, Gunnar Bodvarsson, an engineer largely responsible for her hometown's heating system, was appointed to a position in its state university. She moved from there to Canada in 1969 and is widely known there as a poet and visual artist. Her two volumes entitled *Settlement Poems*, published in 1980, draw on personal as well as archival sources such as journals as she explores the ever-timely theme of crossing borders.

Further reading on this aspect of Canadian culture can be found in the 1997 study by Daisy Neijmann, *The Icelandic Voice in Canadian Letters: The Contribution of Icelandic Canadian Writers to Canadian Literature*, in the series 'Nordic Voices', which offers history and literary criticism over the whole subject.

The Icelandic National League of North America was founded immediately after the end of World War 1 in 1919, with the aim of providing continuity and contact amongst the rising generations. An Icelandic Festival (known as *Íslendingadagurinn*) had been inaugurated as early as 1890 in Winnipeg and since 1932 has been held annually in Gimli. Throughout the Gimli year there are forms of commemoration such as special church services, fund-raising events and visits to historic sites such as the 'Walk to The Rock'

in memory of the 1875 foundation of the community, keeping the Icelandic heritage alive.

The Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba was founded in 1951 with the creation of a professorial chair with funds raised from Icelanders across North America. Scholars from Iceland and from Canada have held this position and the department has supported a range of programmes and publications based on outstanding research.

The 2011 Canadian census listed 94,205 people of Icelandic descent out of approximately 36 million (0.3% of Canada's population). Canada has the largest such population outside Iceland anywhere in the world and Manitoba the largest concentration. Gimli's population is about 2,250 but it swells on those occasions when people return to the place they call 'home' whether literally or metaphorically. The sign at the town's edge reads "Welcome to Gimli, Your Place in the Sun". Every year hundreds of 'vinarterta', a layered cake with prune filling beloved of Icelanders, are sent across North America by a baker in Gimli. Foodways are often the most tenacious of traditions, lasting when others have faded and these give a taste of 'home'. This concept and their cultural heritage continue to have real meaning for the descendants of the original Icelanders of the West. They played a unique role in the history of Canada, offering a settlement model for others to follow.



Figure 4: View of Gimli from the end of the dock, ca 1910 (N11402), Archives of Manitoba, New Iceland collection 410.

Bibliography

This lecture, an overview of a subject which is both broad and deep, has relied on the research, publications and syntheses of others. The settlers began to document their experiences from the very start, in personal logs, local newspapers and letters home. These sources and others have been drawn upon by subsequent historians writing for the community itself as well as for a wider readership. For this lecture the following were useful and are commended to anyone who wishes to pursue the subject further:

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Web resources

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