

The Mystery of *Vínarterta*: In Search of an Icelandic Ethnic Identity

JÓN KARL HELGASON

ABSTRACT: Does there exist a distinct Icelandic ethnic identity in contemporary Canada? To what degree is it similar and to what degree is it different from the traditional Icelandic national identity? Referring to poetry, telepathic messages and works of scholarship, as well as interviews with Canadians of Icelandic origin, this paper tackles these questions. A special emphasis is placed on what Herbert J. Gans has defined as “ethnic symbols,” such as linguistic ethnic markers, ceremonial holidays and ethnic food. Some of these symbols, in particular the pastry known as “vínarterta”, suggest not only how different Icelandic ethnic identity in Canada is from Icelandic national ethnicity, but they also reveal the dire necessity for it to be so.

RÉSUMÉ: Existe-t-il une identité ethnique islandaise distincte dans le Canada contemporain? Jusqu'à quel point est-elle semblable et jusqu'à quel point est-elle différente de l'identité traditionnelle islandaise? En se référant à la poésie, aux messages télépathiques, aux travaux savants ainsi qu'à des entretiens avec des Canadiens d'origine islandaise, cet article s'attaque à ces questions avec une emphase toute particulière sur ce que Herbert J. Gans a qualifié de « symboles ethniques », comme les marqueurs linguistiques et ethniques, les fêtes cérémoniales et la nourriture ethnique. Certains de ces symboles, et plus particulièrement une pâtisserie appelée « vínarterta », suggèrent non seulement une différence entre l'identité ethnique islandaise canadienne et l'identité nationale islandaise, mais révèle également la nécessité profonde de cette différence.

Jón Karl Helgason holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and is a member of the Icelandic Department at the University of Iceland, Reykjavík.



Over the past number of years, Icelandic nationalism and national identity have been the focus of various historical, political, and cultural studies. The time has come, it seems, to review accepted definitions of “Icelandic-ness,” notions shaped in the nineteenth century during Iceland’s quest for political independence from Denmark. The point of departure for many of these studies has been the view, shared by different scholars in the fields of history, anthropology, and political science, that nations are essentially “cultural artifacts” (Anderson 13) that create an imaginary bond between people who would otherwise have little or nothing to do with each other. Consequently, they challenge the traditional view of the Icelandic nation as a “natural” phenomenon, with an inherent nature and characteristics (cf. Hálfðanarson; Matthíasdóttir 2004).

1. Impressions of Icelandic National Identity

Historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has illustrated how Icelandic nationalism, in its early phases, followed the pattern detected by Hans Kohn and others in the construction of German nationalism. Responding to the social and ideological superiority of France and Britain, German nationalists placed their own national identity within an allegedly superior historical and cultural tradition. The ideas of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) were particularly prominent in this context, with their emphasis on the authenticity and purity of the German language as opposed to, for instance, the “corrupted” French. Similarly, Icelandic nationalists defined their national identity and supported their claims for political independence with reference to the Icelandic medieval cultural heritage, especially the saga literature, and the ancient Scandinavian language which they claimed had been preserved almost intact since the country’s settlement in the ninth century. Illustrating this view, Matthíasdóttir (1995 56) quotes historian Jón Aðils who argued in his *Íslenzkt þjóðerni* [Icelandic Nationality] that the Icelandic language was inseparable from Icelandic national identity, and therefore a key to the nation’s political independence: “Íslendingar halda dauðahaldi í tungu sína og þjóðerni og þeim tekst að varðveita hvorttveggja þangað til vitjunar- og lausnartíminn slær” [Icelanders cling to their tongue and nationality and they will be able to safeguard both of them until the promised hour of liberty] (244).

In addition to a common language and cultural heritage, various other aspects can be used to delimit “natural” nations. These include race, religion, history, economic or political interests, natural borders and attachment to a common native soil. Icelandic nationality is generally defined by many, if not all of these aspects. However, as Arnar Guðmundsson points out in his analysis of nationalistic influences in contemporary Icelandic politics, the “natural” character of a nation

is essentially achieved through the act of elaborate myth-making. Influenced by Homi K. Bhabha's claim that nations need to be studied as "narratives of nations," Arnar Guðmundsson highlights for instance how the "narrative" of Iceland's liberation from oppressive Danish rule was retold (and partially redefined) during recent negotiations in the parliament of the country's ties with the European Community (114–21).

In my own research regarding nationalism and the contemporary reception of the Icelandic sagas, I have argued that one of the more influential "narratives" of the Icelandic nation over the past two hundred years is an episode from chapter 75 of the renowned *Njál's saga* (1998 211–18). The leading character Gunnar Hámundarson of Hlíðarendi and his brother Kolskeggur have been sentenced to outlawry and they are riding to their ship when Gunnar's horse stumbles and throws him:

Honum varð litið upp til hlíðarinnar og bæjarins að Hlíðarenda og mælti: "Fögur er hlíðin svo að mér hefir hún aldrei jafnfögur sýnst, bleikir akrar en slegin tún, og mun eg ríða heim aftur og fara hvergi."
(*Brennu-Njálssaga* 119)

[He looked up toward the slope where stood the farmhouses of Hlíðarendi and said: "Fair is the slope, fairer it seems than I have ever seen it before, with whitening grain and the home field mown; and I shall ride back home and not go abroad at all!"]
(*Njál's Saga* 156)

Gunnar then returns to his patrimony of Hlíðarendi, but soon after that he is attacked at his home and killed by his enemies. Kolskeggur, on the other hand, goes abroad, as ordered by law, and becomes a Christian guardsman at the court of Constantinople.

There are several possible ways of interpreting this scene. The obvious one is to praise Kolskeggur for abiding by the law and saving his life, but in the poem "Gunnarshólmi" [Gunnar's Holm] by Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845), Gunnar's decision to stay in Iceland, despite the risk involved, was for the first time defined as an optimum symbol of Icelandic patriotism. In particular, Hallgrímsson rephrased Gunnar's speech from the saga, stressing his Romantic, if rather practical, sense of beauty:

Sá eg ei fyrr svo fagran jarðargróða,
fénaður dreifir sér um græna haga,
við bleikan akur rósinn blikar rjóða.
Hér vil eg una ævi minnar daga
alla sem guð mér sendir. Farðu vel,
bróðir og vinur!—Svo er Gunnars saga.

Því Gunnar vildi heldur bíða hel
 en horfinn vera fósturjarðarströndum.
 Grimmlegir fjendur, flárri studdir vél,
 fjötruðu góðan dreng í heljarböndum.
 Hugljúfa samt eg sögu Gunnars tel...
 (1989 79)

[Never before has Iceland seemed so fair,
 the fields so golden, roses in such glory,
 such crowds of sheep and cattle everywhere!
 Here will I live, here die—in youth or hoary
 hapless old age—as God decrees. Good-bye,
 brother and friend.” Thus Gunnar’s gallant story.

For Gunnar felt it nobler far to die
 than flee and leave his native shores behind him,
 even though foes, inflamed with hate and sly,
 were forging links of death in which to bind him.
 His story still can make the heart beat high...]
 (2002 137–38)

By the middle of the twentieth century, Hallgrímsson’s patriotic interpretation of Gunnar’s “return” had been so fully accepted by Icelanders that the scene—and thereby the saga which contained it—was becoming a national emblem, encompassing the entire Icelandic character. Matthías Johannessen summed up the case in his study of the poetic tradition of *Njáls saga*: “Ef á Njálu er minnzt, vita allir, við hvað er átt. Og ‘fögur er hlíðin’ merkir aðeins eitt: þá dýpstu og sönnustu ættjarðarást, sem til er” [If you mention *Njáls saga*, everybody knows what you mean. And ‘fair is the slope’ has only one meaning: the deepest and the truest patriotism imaginable] (167).

In Hallgrímsson’s poem the Icelandic sagas, written in the ancient Icelandic language, were united with the native soil. Gísli Sigurðsson has exemplified how these three elements have become fundamental factors in the development of contemporary Icelandic national identity:

The emphasis has always been on the uniqueness of all these elements: no other nation in Western Europe was still speaking the same language as had been spoken in the Middle Ages, no other nation in the Middle Ages had created literature which came anywhere near to resembling the Icelandic sagas, and no other nation lived in a country of comparable beauty and uniqueness, with the contrasting images of ice and fire in glaciers and volcanoes, the desolate black lava fields, and the rich green farmlands. So successful has been the construction of a national identity based on these three main factors that there has been little scepticism as to whether they were indeed the major components of Icelandic culture.

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During the past few years, various studies have revealed how this pattern of identity is being reproduced on Icelandic bank notes, in tourist brochures, even in the planning of official visits of foreign ministers and heads of state to Iceland (cf. Einarsson; Sigurðsson; Helgason 1998 197-207).

It seems, however, that the Icelanders are destined both to reconsider the established notion of their “uniqueness” and to make their definition of nationality more flexible (cf. Arnar Guðmundsson 1995 128-31). Immigrants from various parts of the world, along with diverse cultural, economic and political developments—in particular influences from the United States and the European Community—are already shaping Icelandic contemporary life extensively. In this context, Gísli Sigurðsson presents us with “the haddock-chicken-hamburger-and-pasta eating Icelander who spends his time watching television, perhaps skiing on good weekends in the winter, and travelling to British and Irish—even North American—cities for Christmas shopping” (72). Similarly, Magnús Einarsson’s study of tourism and the image of modern Iceland reveals how the authenticity of Iceland is initially being constructed or “staged” by the tourist industry, not only for tourists, but also for Icelanders themselves—“the spectators of their own dramatisation” (234).

Concerns regarding the unpredictable future of Icelandic national identity in the global village coincide with a revived interest on the part of Icelanders in the history and destiny of the Western-Icelanders, that is, the Icelandic immigrants who moved to North America between approximately 1875 and 1915. Acclaimed works of fiction and scholarship dealing with this period, when almost one fourth of the nation left its native soil, have been appearing regularly and finding a receptive audience.¹ At the same time, works by Canadian authors of Icelandic descent have been published in Icelandic translation.² As a producer at The Icelandic National Broadcasting, I have been personally involved in this development, producing in 1995 and 1996 half a dozen programs on the Icelandic-Canadian community in Canada and Icelandic-Canadian literature. The response I got to these programs made me contemplate whether there was a connection between the present discussion on Icelandic national identity and the revived interest of Icelanders in Western Icelandic history and culture. In certain respects, it seems that modern Icelanders are experiencing a cultural transition which is in some ways comparable to that of the early immigrants—although it is now the “New World” that is immigrating to Iceland. Clearly, it is impossible to see what effect this transition will have in the long run on Icelandic nationality and national identity. But the conception of an Icelandic ethnic identity in North America may offer a preliminary answer to this question.

2. The Process of Negotiation

The assimilation—or acculturation, as anthropologists sometime term it—of an ethnic group to a new society is usually a complex and a perplexing procedure, involving various stages or “subprocesses” (Gordon 60–83). As far as Western-Icelanders are concerned, it has been argued that they were relatively successful in adapting to their Canadian and American host societies and in preserving important characteristics of their cultural heritage. In his survey, “The Icelandic Canadians: The Paradox of an Assimilated Ethnic Group,” the Icelandic-Canadian anthropologist John S. Matthiasson writes:

In moving to Canada, the Icelanders hoped to find a new land which would allow them to preserve traditions which they felt were basic to their home society. At the same time, they were prepared to sacrifice tradition when it conflicted with assimilation to a new social order. This apparent contradiction or paradox has characterized their life in Winnipeg.
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In his article, Matthiasson primarily emphasizes two related traditions from the old country that the Icelandic immigrants sought strongly to preserve, that is, literary writing or publishing and education, but on the whole the process of assimilation can be characterized as a continuous negotiation between a previous Icelandic national identity and the contemporary circumstances of the immigrants and their families (new citizenship, a new language, different geography, etc.). This process of negotiation can be briefly exemplified through several Western-Icelandic texts relating to *Njáls saga*.

On reflection, it is striking how the nationalistic view of *Njáls saga*’s narrative of Gunnar’s return completely dismisses the emigrant experience: to leave Iceland, according to that interpretation, was almost tantamount to betraying one’s nationality. Many early Western-Icelandic poets dealt with this dilemma by expressing their love for Iceland—“the fair slope”—even regretting that they had left it, but also by identifying themselves with different saga heroes, in particular explorer Leifur Eiríksson. Viðar Hreinsson observes:

Many poems express sorrow over the departure. Soon a certain self-representation was developed, repeated again and again, in parts or as a whole: Icelandic nature and history is glorified, its present state lamented, the emigrants view themselves as seeking freedom, parallel to the settlers of Iceland and Vinland explorers.
(1993 8)

However, there were also some Western-Icelandic poets, such as Stephan G. Stephanson (1853–1927), who deconstructed such fundamental concepts of the

Icelandic nationalistic discourse as *fósturland* [native soil/foster-country] and *útlagi* [outlaw] (cf. Guðsteinsdóttir). In this context, the poet Káinn (K. N. Júlíus Jónsson, 1860-1936) provides a particularly powerful example in an ambiguous parody of Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Gunnarshólmi," characterising a modern Gunnar who rather wanted to "go to hell" (be a starving, toiling immigrant in North America) than to stay on his native soil (Júlíus 272-73). But as Daisy L. Neijmann has remarked, the poem

is not only quite disrespectfully tongue-in-cheek with regard to literary reference, it also parodies two very sensitive Western Icelandic issues: the new Gunnar preferred to leave his native hills, and his ultimate fate was no great improvement on what he left behind.

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A related but different example of Western-Icelanders' coming to terms with their immigrant experience is represented by a curious genre of publication containing messages or letters from deceased people who had been in touch with a telepathic centre managed in Winnipeg by the Western-Icelandic couple Jóhann and Guðlaug Frímánn. The first of these books, *Ljóð og ræður* [Poems and Speeches], published in 1930, contains for instance messages from two departed Danish kings, an Icelandic bishop, several nineteenth-century Icelandic poets, and quite a few saga heroes, all of whom wanted to address the Icelandic nation on the occasion of the Icelandic parliament's millenium. In 1932 and 1950 more letters of the same kind were published as volume two and three in the telepathic series *Bréf frá Ingu* [Letters from Inga] (cf. Helgason 1998 92-102). One of the saga characters presented in these books is Gunnar Hámundarson of *Njáls saga*. In *Ljóð og ræður* he encourages the Icelandic nation to maintain its spirit and resolve its own problems. He also states that even though he had consciously chosen Iceland as the resting place for his physical remains, his spirit has survived and emigrated to a planet called Ukutu (*Ljóð og ræður* 138-39). In *Bréf frá Ingu*, Gunnar gives a more vivid description of his life in the new environment; he has turned away from his heathen beliefs and customs and is now a practicing Christian. He has also given up farming and is employed in industry: "að stýra aflgjafa, sem notaður er við þung verk, eins og til dæmis við húsbýggingar og þess háttar" [governing a power-source, used for heavy tasks, such as the construction of buildings] (*Bréf frá Ingu og fleirum* 149). It does not require much imagination to equate Gunnar's life on Ukutu with the life of a Western-Icelandic construction worker in Winnipeg during the first decades of the last century. More generally, however, one is tempted to compare the negotiation between the fading Icelandic national identity and the developing Icelandic ethnic identity to the telepathic relationship between the bygone saga heroes and the modern industrialized world. As in Káinn's example, tradition is at the same time being utilized and reconstructed.

It should be noted that both Káinn's poem about the modern Gunnar and the telepathic messages from the deceased Gunnar were published in Icelandic, at a time when a large segment of the Icelandic ethnic community in North America could still feel at home within the narrative of "Icelandic-ness" as a linguistic category. Among third- and fourth-generation Canadians and Americans of Icelandic origin, however, the Icelandic language as an emblem of identity has been lost. Even if some people in this group still understand Icelandic, and a few even feel comfortable speaking it, English is their native tongue. While there seems no need to stress this fact, it remains to be observed that there is generally a slight difference between the native English that people of Icelandic origin speak, at least to each other, and mainstream English.

It did not take me long to realise this when I visited Winnipeg and the Icelandic immigrant-settlements in the Interlake area of Manitoba for the first time in the fall of 1995. The objective of my trip was to present a paper at the University of Manitoba on the modern reception of the Icelandic sagas, but as a radio producer I used the opportunity to interview various members of the Icelandic-Canadian community in the area. Almost everyone I interviewed in English used some Icelandic terms during our conversation. Most of the words in question were learned early in life. Nelson Gerrard said, for instance, that the only Icelandic he had heard in his youth were perhaps four or five words, such as *amma* [grandmother], *afi* [grandfather], *vínarterta* [Viennese cake] and *labbakútur* [little lad]. Others supplied me with similar or different lists, but my attention was also drawn to Icelandic placenames such as Geysisbyggð [Geysir Village] and Djúpidalur [Deep Valley]. My personal favourite was the local Gimli shop of Njálsbúð. Originally, its name referred to the facilities where Njáll, the title character of *Njáls saga*, would lodge when the Icelandic medieval parliament was holding its yearly summer session, but in modern Icelandic *búð* has acquired the meaning of a small store. Although vocabulary of this kind is limited, I sensed that it is of great importance to Canadians of Icelandic origin. The words involved are ethnic markers which express the fundamentals of Icelandic-Canadian identity, and which indeed partially derive their importance from the very fact that they are Icelandic.

Of these Icelandic terms, *vínarterta* was the one I found most frequently mentioned. Raelene Johnson, then secretary to The Icelandic National League, told me she responded to repeated requests for the recipe for this layered cake. Connie Magnússon, whom I met at the Gimli Christmas market, lamented that her *vínarterta* had just sold out. She insisted that my pilgrimage to Canada would not be complete until I tasted *vínarterta* and she brought a generous slice to my hotel before the day was over. When asked why this cake was so important, Shirley Syms replied:

Well it is because it is what you eat at Christmas. And I think most people in Winnipeg, non Icelanders, know what *vínarterta* is and they love it, they just love it. So I guess we are kind of proud of it. It just sort of identifies us, I think it identifies us.

(Helgason 1996)

These and other replies suggested to me that *vínarterta* might be regarded as a major “institution” of the Icelandic ethnic community in North America, no less important than, say, the weekly paper *Lögberg-Heimskringla* or the Icelandic Department at the University of Manitoba. At the same time they confirmed that the Icelandic ethnic identity is clearly disconnected from Icelandic national identity: generally modern Icelanders do not consider the *vínarterta* to be one of their national dishes.

3. *Vínarterta* as an Ethnic Symbol

In the past two or three decades, scholars have noted a renewed interest in ethnicity in multicultural societies. According to Herbert J. Gans, this interest, kindled among third and fourth generation “ethnics,” is not to be seen as a revival, but rather as a new and symbolic stage in the conception of ethnicity:

Since ethnic identity needs are neither intense nor frequent in this generation, however, ethnics do not need either ethnic cultures or organizations; instead, they resort to the use of ethnic symbols. As a result, ethnicity may be turning into symbolic ethnicity, an ethnicity of last resort, which could, nevertheless, persist for generations.

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Symbolic ethnicity, Gans explains, can be expressed in various ways, but it is “characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or of the old country,” which can be felt or experienced “without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior” (9).

As examples of cultural patterns frequently transformed into ethnic symbols, Gans mentions ceremonial holidays (e.g. the saint’s days of Irish Catholics), shared historical experiences (the Holocaust for the Jews), and consumer goods—“notably food [is] another ready source for ethnic symbols” (10). For many Canadians of Icelandic origin, the yearly celebration of *Íslendingadagurinn* and the narrative describing the journey of the first Icelandic immigrants from Winnipeg to Gimli in the fall of 1875 have acquired the status of ethnic symbols. My radio interviews left me with the impression, however, that Icelandic ethnic identity was most frequently and generally being experienced by way of digestion. In addition to

the *vínarterta*, there are numerous other traditional Icelandic recipes and dishes circulating in the Icelandic community in North America including *kleinur*, *rúllupylsa*, *pönnukökur*, and *lifrarpylsa*.

To gain a better understanding of the symbolic significance of ethnic food one need only consult Bill Holm's essay "The Art of Brown Bread and Vínarterta." In his collection, *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*, Holm devotes fifty nutritious pages to the importance of ethnic cooking, partially basing himself on his ethnic Icelandic background. Among his various examples, one finds the Scandinavian *lutefisk*, which is initially "cod (or some other stock fish) hung in the open air, dried until it resembles an off-white board, then brined in a lye solution" (208). Holm traces how this dish is sold and served around Christmas, and plays a symbolic role for Americans of Norwegian origin. But he also tackles the disturbing question: "Is lutefisk food at all?"

Marginally—it can be eaten, but that is not the point. The fifty percent of nineteenth-century Norway that emigrated and whose descendants now populate the central Midwest eat it, whether consciously or not, to honor their ancestors, the poverty, grief, and uprooting in their own history. Lutefisk means bitter Passover herbs for jackleg Lutherans. It is human, even decent or noble to make a road back into your grandfather's life by lifting the same fork of jiggling odorous fish to your mouth—you in your middle-classness, he in his awful poverty. It is a sort of historical Eucharist when we take and eat the stuff.

(208-09)

As for *vínarterta*—an immigrant Icelander's version of *lutefisk* (217)—Holm emphasizes that it is not a dish that modern Icelanders see as a symbol for their national identity. In this respect, *vínarterta* differs significantly from *kleinur*, *rúllupylsa*, *pönnukökur* and *lifrarpylsa*. As suggested by its name (Viennese cake) the recipe might have been imported to Iceland from Austria, probably via Copenhagen. It became very popular in Iceland during the second half of the nineteenth century, but since then different kinds of cakes have gained ground.

The relatively low profile of *vínarterta* in modern Iceland inspired me to call the radio programs I made after my visit to Winnipeg and the Interlake area "The Mystery of *Vínarterta*." With this title, I wanted to stress, not only how distinctly different Icelandic ethnic identity is from Icelandic national identity, but also the dire necessity for it to be so. Many of the Icelandic-Canadians I interviewed had highlighted this difference. One of the first things Stella Arnfinnsson said when we met was that I had to realize that she was indeed Canadian. When I asked why she considered it important to specifically point this out she replied:

In this country we are often seen as Western-Icelanders, and I guess I would like to think that people see us as Canadian and that the connection is not just that we

have flown from Iceland and we live here but that we were born here and brought up as Canadians, but always knowing our heritage.
(Helgason 1996)

Her answer confirms the continuing relevance of the paradox John Matthiasson detected thirty years ago in the ethnic assimilation process of Canadians of Icelandic origin: “While resisting the categorization of ‘ethnics,’ they have attempted to continue to be ‘Icelanders’” (196). In the conclusion of her study of the Icelandic voice in Canadian letters, Daisy L. Neijmann detects a similar paradox within the field of literature, where the official policy of multiculturalism (the Canadian mosaic) has in some sense worked counterproductively, endorsing the status quo of Anglo-Canadian dominance: “Once the label ‘ethnic’ has been attached to a work of literature, it is no longer eligible for the label ‘Canadian’” (382). Furthermore, Neijmann claims that contemporary Canadian writers of Icelandic origin have, on the basis of their ethnic themes and backgrounds, been set apart from the mainstream, being “almost automatically excluded from national literary recognition” (*ibid.*). In this context of ethnicity and “otherness,” it is interesting to note how *vínarterta* is in many respects an advantageous ethnic symbol for people of Icelandic origin in North America. Contrary to *kleinur* and *rúllupylsa*—not to mention more outlandish traditional Icelandic food like *slátur* [blood sausage], *svið* [singed head of sheep] and *hrútsprungar* [sour sheep testicles]—*vínarterta* links the Icelandic ethnicity with the bourgeois cuisine of cultivated Europe.

Another reason for the special focus on *vínarterta* in my radio series was its metaphorical qualities. I first discerned these qualities during an interview with anthropologist John Matthiasson. Referring to the first decades of the Icelandic presence in Canada, he emphasized a significant dualism in the way in which the Icelandic community originally developed in Manitoba:

We see it throughout the Icelandic community here, that there was two of everything, there were the two newspaper politically opposed to one another, there were the two churches, the Lutheran and the Unitarian at a time ... and these things divided the community and yet they held them together.
(Helgason 1996)

Although related to issues of politics, class and religion, this dualism seemed to Matthiasson inherent in Icelandic society and personality, a dualism he had sometimes characterized in terms of fire and ice (202-03). I, on the other hand, was tempted to translate these grand contrasts of nature into the less poetic concepts of pastry and paste, the two elements that create the different layers of *vínarterta* and yet hold it together.

Even if some of the contrasts within Icelandic-Canadian society have disappeared, the amalgamation of the two rival newspapers *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla* being the primary example, others have survived and new ones developed. For instance, some of the interviews conveyed to me the understanding that certain (however friendly) tensions now existed between the weekly *Lögberg-Heimskringla* on the one hand and *The Icelandic Canadian Magazine* on the other. Another example I came across during my short visit to Manitoba was of a geographical nature, relating to the site of Willow Point, south of Gimli, where the stone monument at White Rock marks the landing site of the first Icelandic immigrants who came sailing along the coast of Lake Winnipeg in the fall of 1875. Interviewing Stefan Stefansson at the Gimli Museum, I had sensed that the landing site was an important historical place for many Canadians of Icelandic descent. Furthermore, Connie Magnusson had told me about the growing number of local people who walked to Willow Point from Gimli on the 21st of October every year, to honour the day when the first immigrants landed. But where exactly did they land? Neil Bardal pointed out to me that there were two different versions of the story, the one Stefansson had just presented to me and a slightly deviant one. In Stefansson's version, the immigrants drifted into a small pond just south of Willow Point and then got off their rafts. Then there is what Neil Bardal called "the unofficial version" asserting that the immigrants simply landed on the shore of the lake, next to the White Rock itself (Helgason 1996). One more point of conflict—that was my initial thought. In view of Matthiasson's dualistic theory, however, it later occurred to me that the controversy over Willow Point was perhaps important to its continued existence as a site of significance. As long as the people of the Gimli area disagree on the issue, Willow Point is considered a symbolic ethnic place, a place experienced as meaningful to their personal identity.

The list of conflicts does not end here. In a series of articles, anthropologist Anne Brydon has focused on tensions in the Icelandic-Canadian community regarding the increasing commercialization of *Íslendingadagurinn* and the unveiling of a controversial monument in Gimli (1989, 1991 and 1997). In both cases, different definitions and representations of Icelandic-Canadian identity are clashing. However, the most symbolic example of conflict remains *vínarterta* itself. As Bill Holm relates in his essay, there is considerable disagreement over the correct recipe:

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

or brandy. This is daring and unconventional—the bobbed hair or pierced ears of *Vinarterta*-dom—but it might possibly be right.
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Holm himself authorizes Mrs. Pete Jokull's version of the *vínarterta* found in the 1926 edition of the *Young Ladies Union Cookbook*. Being neither a specialist in the field of baking nor an ethnic North American Icelander, I have no intention of taking sides in the debate, but may I suggest that the day Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent agree on the recipe, they will have lost not only their taste for *vínarterta* but also a significant element of their ethnic identity?

Concluding my radio series I emphasized that a distinct Icelandic ethnic identity definitely does exist, an identity that provides native Icelanders with a fresh perspective on the assumed “naturalness” of their own national sensibility. Despite its quarrelsome paste-and-pastry texture, and the threatening counterproductiveness of ethnic identities in general, the Icelandic ethnic identity in North America seems to be regarded as a positive attribute, a symbolic marker that people of mixed background value and often prefer to their other ethnic origins. Nevertheless, in the final moments of the last program I still wondered whether there was something particularly “Icelandic” about this ethnic identity. My motive for asking was another, and a more basic question: What in the contemporary Icelandic national identity, if anything, is apt to survive the unforeseen developments of world politics, global commercialization and mass media?

Personally, I had not felt at home in John Matthiasson's dualistic world of fire and ice. On the other hand, there was something Erla Margret Simundsson had said during our conversation about being *einstaklingur*—an independent and, perhaps, stubborn and eccentric individual—that continued to haunt me. Her words seemed to contain the key to the very mystery of *vínarterta* which I had been trying to solve: “And to be an individual—that is very Icelandic in people. There are many Canadian Icelanders who are eccentric and individualistic” (Helgason 1996). But maybe it was just the way in which she said it, in the language of her Icelandic ancestors: “Og það að vera einstaklingur, það er sérstaklega íslenskt í fólki. Það eru margir kanadískir Íslendingar sem eru sérstakir og einstaklingar.”

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NOTES

1. Recent Icelandic publications dealing with Western Icelandic issues include Arngrímsson 1997 and 1998; Björnsdóttir; Böðvar Guðmundsson 1995 and 1996; *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga*; Halldórsson; Hreinnsson 2002 and 2003; *Burt—og meir en bæjarleið*; Sigtryggdóttir; Steinsdóttir.
2. Recent Icelandic translations of literature by Canadian authors of Icelandic decent include *Íslandslag: íslensk-kanadískar bókmenntir frá 1870 til nútímans*; Salverson; Valgardson 1995 and 1996.

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