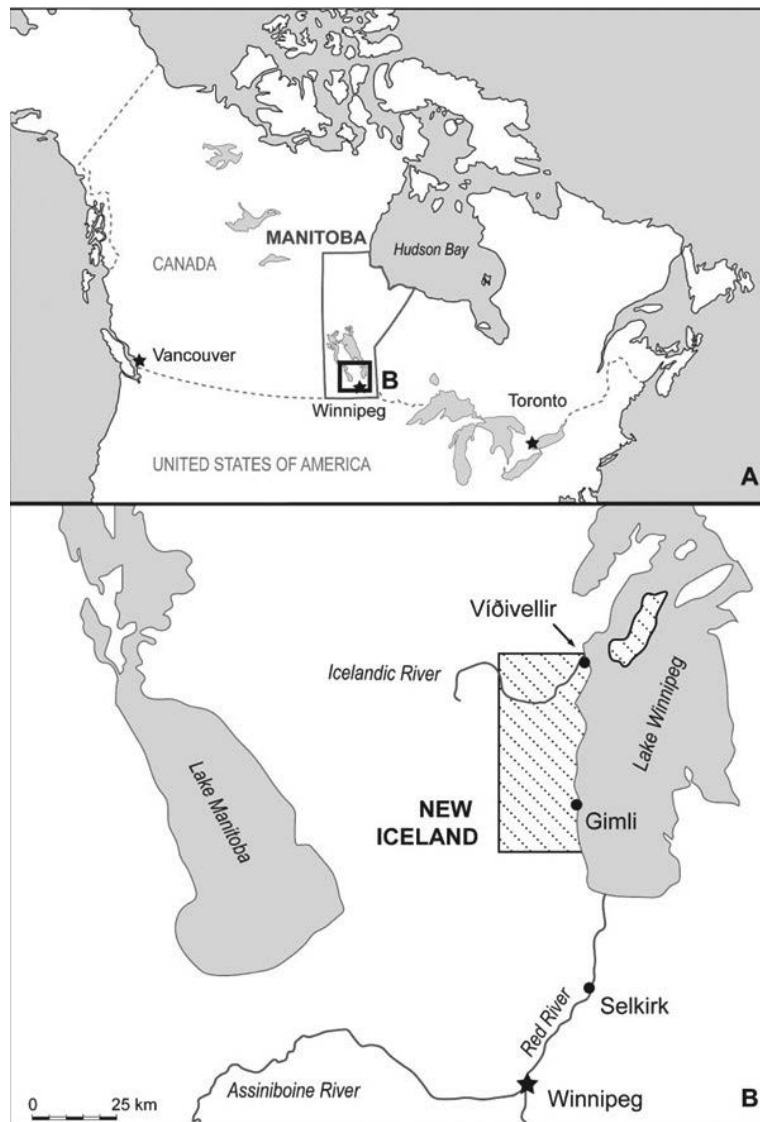


## Introduction

Between 1874 and 1914 approximately twenty thousand Icelanders emigrated from Iceland to North America. The emigration was a part of a much wider and well documented emigration from Europe to the ‘New World’ in the 19th century. The Icelandic emigration started later than in other Scandinavian and North European countries, in part because of infrequent and irregular transport links to and from the country. It is estimated that around 20 percent of the Icelandic population emigrated in this period, spurred by a lack of opportunities, limited arable land and slow material ‘progress’ in their native land. From the 1880s onwards emigration agents working in Iceland actively encouraged emigration. This, along with positive news

from friends and family who had already emigrated kept up the number of emigrants until the outbreak of the First World War. The majority of Icelandic emigrants settled in Western Canada.

The Canadian government reserved a tract of land for the exclusive use of Icelandic immigrants along the western coast of Lake Winnipeg in 1875 (Figure 1). The Icelandic reserve was a part of the Canadian government’s effort to populate the vast prairies with white European agriculturalists and the Icelandic settlers received substantial financial aid to help them make the colony successful (Eyford 2006, 2016; Arngrimsson 1997;



**Figure 1. Location of the Icelandic reserve in Canada: A) The Interlake region within the province of Manitoba and Canada respectively and B) detail map of the Interlake region highlighting the Icelandic reserve and place names mentioned in the text. Produced by Ana Jorge.**

Thor 2002). The colony drew its founding population from Iceland and from scattered Icelandic settlements across North America, most extensively from Kinmount, Ontario and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

This book explores the experiences of families in Iceland and in the Icelandic colony in Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through archaeological excavation of two farmsteads, analysis of historical documents and interviews with former inhabitants and descendants it highlights a series of interconnected themes that are underpinned by *change and continuity*. Society in 19th century Iceland was vastly different to the one the Canadian government sought to establish on the western prairies. The emigrants had to negotiate this difference and their experiences hold real potential to broaden our understanding of immigration and culture contact.

In the global North we are informed, daily, of an immigration problem. In countries, such as Iceland, societal structures (icel. innviðir, lit. internal woodwork) are regularly referred to in this discourse. Politicians and social commentators suggest that there is a tipping point beyond which these structures will start to break apart. They warn that there simply will not be enough teachers and doctors to look after everyone, and even natural resources such as hot water and electricity will run out. This is in stark contrast to the late 19th-century discourse on the emigration. When more people left Iceland than arrived, commentators worried that there wouldn't be enough hands to build a modern society. The investigation into the experiences of families in Iceland and New Iceland, Canada during the late 19th century offers an opportunity to explore the processes of community building in both places. It shows, that rather than being a drain on resources, people who migrate bring knowledge and skills to new tasks and build new worlds. The experiences of the Icelandic emigrants serve as a reminder that the structures that support our wellbeing are made by people and strengthened through improvisation and adjustments afforded by migration.

No archaeological research has been carried out into the emigration from Iceland to Canada. This research brings forth a new source of data and demonstrates how an emphasis on material culture can forward our understanding of migration and how it affects changing ideologies, identities and subsistence strategies. This book focuses on two households, the families at Hornbrekka, Iceland and the Guttormssons at Víðivellir, New Iceland. Their stories were not chosen because they are the best examples of people's experiences during the emigration movement but because they provide an alternative view, which can be juxtaposed to a well-rehearsed grand narrative of the emigration (the grand narrative will be discussed in chapter 1). The historical archaeology of the two households, moreover, has real potential to deepen our understanding of migration in the 19th century and to challenge binary interpretive models of cultural continuity and change.

New Iceland was established on land settled by Ojibwa and Cree people who unsuccessfully protested the creation of this new colonial space, which offered the incoming Icelanders exclusive rights to the land (Eyford 2016). In 1875, when the first Icelandic immigrants arrived, the majority of the Ojibwa and Cree population lived along the White Mud River, at Sandy Bar on the coast of Lake Winnipeg and on Big Island. The Icelanders gradually claimed the land using new place names: White Mud River became Icelandic River, Sandy Bar became Sandvík and Big Island became Mikley and later Hecla Island, named after the Icelandic volcano. Aided by government officials the Icelandic immigrants took control of the area after the local resistance was severely weakened by an outbreak of smallpox in the winter of 1876. The Icelanders settled their lands, and some even moved into houses that had previously belonged to families of the Sandy Bar band.

In 1877 New Iceland counted approximately 1200 Icelandic immigrants. However, it experienced an exodus in the early 1880s, after unsuccessful attempts at cultivation following severe floods and a divisive religious controversy that saw the colonists flock behind two Lutheran pastors. Some followed their pastor to North Dakota, while other families relocated to southern Manitoba or to the other prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta in search for better land. The population of New Iceland is estimated to have dwindled to as low as 250 in 1881 before its fortunes were reversed with renewed immigration from Iceland (Kristjanson 1965). By the time the colony was opened to other nationalities in 1897 it was home to over 1500 first- and second-generation Icelandic immigrants. The vast majority of the population who claimed the remaining homesteads in the former reserve in the late 19th - and the first decade of the 20th century were Ukrainians. It is estimated that in 1905 the population around Gimli in the south of the former colony was equally Icelandic and Ukrainian while in 1910 most of the residents in former New Iceland were of Ukrainian descent (Ewanchuck 1977, 22).

Today Manitoba holds a prominent place in the imagination of Icelanders living in Iceland. The area attracts continued interest from academics as well as travelling and migrating Icelanders. The former colony of New Iceland is dotted with Icelandic place names displayed on blue plaques, the Icelandic national flag is prominent on official buildings as well as on private lawns, cars, and boats. A tall Viking Statue by the lake front in Gimli is a constant reminder of the inhabitants' Viking heritage. Such display of Icelandic national symbols is rare outside of Iceland, which regardless of a population growth of around 150% since gaining independence in 1944, is still a very small nation, counting 387,758 inhabitants on the 1st of January 2023 (Hagstofa Íslands n.d.). Despite a fascination in Iceland with Gimli 'a whole other Iceland thousands of kilometres away' (*The Reykjavik Grapevine* 2010, August 28, 1) - the view towards the emigrants and their descendants has not always been positive. Those who emigrated were often

painted as traitors in the national newspapers during the emigration period and for much of the 20th century the relationship between Old and New Iceland was tentative. Icelandic-Canadians have been frequent visitors and supporters of various developments in Iceland, especially in the beginning of the 20th century, while discussion of the emigrants in Iceland in the latter half of the 20th century has varied from bordering on ridicule (see e.g. Gústafsson 1998) to curiosity and respect (on the changing relationship between the emigrants and their homeland see Heiðarsson 1999 and chapter 4).

However, since the emigration period drew to a close various formal institutions and associations, predominantly in North America, have actively nurtured a connection between the two countries. The most prominent one is the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, the only one of its kind outside of Iceland. It was established in 1951 in large part due to the North American Icelandic community's support and donations. The department facilitates research and cultural exchanges between the two countries. At the start of the 21st century there was a surge in scholarly interest in the emigration period in Iceland with biographies, diaries and letters from emigrants being published (see e.g. Hreinsson 2002, 2003; Guðmundsson, Erlendur 2002; Sigtryggsdóttir 2002; Guðmundsson, Böðvar 2001, 2002, 2021; Ólafsson & Magnússon 2001). This interest is notable in the dramatic increase in academic theses being written on the subject in disciplines such as politics, theology, anthropology, and history at the University of Iceland (see e.g. Sveinsson 2011; Sigvaldadóttir 2009; Guðjónsdóttir 2009; Ögmundardóttir 2002; Einarsdóttir 2005; Sigfússon 2001; Jónsdóttir 2002) as well as in scholarly monographs (see e.g. Thor 2002; Kjartansson & Heiðarsson 2003; Jónsson 2009). This increasing interest can be partly credited to the establishment of an Emigration Centre and Museum in Hofsós, North Iceland in 1996. The Centre provides genealogical services and through its museum and exhibitions it actively communicates the history of the emigration period.

My own interest in the emigration was sparked in the early 2000s when I read Böðvar Guðmundsson's historical novels *Hibyli Vindanna* (1995) (*Where the Winds Dwell*) and *Lífsins Tré* (1996) (*The Tree of Life*). The first novel is set in western Iceland and follows the fate of a family that emigrates and the second follows the lives of their descendants in Canada. The fictional district where the first novel is set is heavily based on the countryside where the author grew up and where I happened to be conducting an archaeological survey in 2004. I started reading the novels after I surveyed a small ruin, which I was told had been the home of the family that had inspired the characters in Guðmundsson's novels. Since then, I was fascinated with the archaeology of the emigration. I had just finished my undergraduate degree in archaeology in 2004 and it was not until the summer of 2008 when I approached Karen Milek on the possibility of writing a doctoral thesis on the

emigration. Karen herself had explored the possibilities of such a project in 1999 and conducted a trial excavation in a ruined farmstead, which was the former home to a migrant family (Milek 2001). Karen became my supervisor at the University of Aberdeen when I started my doctoral studies in 2008. I submitted my thesis, on which this book is based, in 2012. Since that time, I have continued to work on the data I accumulated during my studies and conducted new research in Manitoba. I have also worked on the archaeology of early modern Iceland, on the themes I became interested in during my doctoral studies, notably on daily routines and consumption. While the book is based on the thesis, I have attempted to draw from this new research when appropriate.

## Methodology and Research Themes

By leaving Iceland the Icelandic emigrants created a different way of life. It was this difference that I set out to explore. At the outset of my research, I decided to excavate two farm sites, one in Iceland and another one in Canada. The farm Hornbrekka in North Iceland was selected as the Icelandic farm and an excavation was conducted in August 2009 (Edwald & Milek 2013). Páll Gunnlaugsson and Nanna Álfhildur Jónsdóttir lived at the farm from 1868 until they emigrated to Manitoba with their two young children in 1876. The couple settled in Winnipeg and in 1887 they moved to New Iceland where they established a farm and named it Sunnuhvoll (Sunny Knoll) (Sigurðsson et al. 1984). In September 2009 I conducted a trial excavation at Sunnuhvoll to determine the extent of any buried archaeology. The farm site had been substantially landscaped in the late 20th century and the results of the test trenches were negative. My focus then shifted from tracing the family of Páll and Nanna to selecting a suitable farm for the Canadian excavation. Site visits and interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2009 with a special focus on parts of the former colony that had been continually settled by Icelandic immigrants and their descendants but were now abandoned. The site of Víðivellir, which was claimed by Jón Guttormsson and Pálína Ketilsdóttir in 1877, met these criteria. It had well preserved archaeology and the enthusiasm and interest of its owner Nelson Gerrard and the initial settlers' descendants Gail Foster and June Arnason marked it as a particularly promising site. The excavation at Víðivellir was conducted in the summer of 2010 (Edwald 2014).

Alongside the archaeological excavations I conducted documentary research, primarily centred on the history of habitation at the two sites as well as locating any historical records, such as store ledgers, inspections and inventories, that were associated with the sites. The descendants of the Guttormsson family at Víðivellir Gail Foster and June Arnason were interviewed as well as Hólmfríður Sölvadóttir, who grew up at Hornbrekka.

The themes through which the changes and continuities in the emigrants' lives will be discussed provide a

sliding focus from individual households to the broader communities and societies in which they became nested. Each chapter tackles a specific theme: ethnicity, wealth, refinement, and modernity. Importantly these will be discussed in terms of *becomings*, i.e. becoming Canadian (chapter 4), becoming wealthy (chapter 5), becoming refined (chapter 6) and becoming modern (chapter 7). By employing the concept of becoming it is possible to move away from associating change with rupture and from defining the experiences of the emigrants in binary terms as either/or (Icelandic/Canadian, poor/wealthy, unrefined/refined, traditional/modern).

Archaeologists have long recognised change as meaningful. A focus on change, however, carries with it a tendency to divide events and things into before and after, thus determining a point in time when rupture is thought to have taken place. Such analysis risks producing an understanding that is based on binary, oppositional categories. Dichotomies are inherently unhelpful in explaining change. A focus on the process of becoming furthers an understanding of *continuity through change* that is more sensitive to the nuances and experiences of people in the past. Less attention has been given to *continuity* in archaeological explanations as it has often been disregarded as what is there in the absence of change and does not require explanation or analysis.

### **Outline of Chapters**

Chapter 1 provides a review of research into the emigration period in Iceland and Canada. It criticises the grand narrative of the emigration that has been created and re-created in various publications throughout the 20th century. This narrative is rich in national romanticism, cultural determinism and largely fails to critically engage with the rich resources available. The chapter provides a brief review of historical archaeology in Iceland and Canada and an introduction to the main interpretive themes of capitalism, improvement and modernity.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical approach of the book and employs the concepts of modernity and tradition, as alternative articulations on the opposition between continuity and change. The chapter proposes a way forward by adopting a theoretical perspective that affords continuity through change and has the potential to challenge a linear and progressive view of history. This perspective will be employed in subsequent chapters of the book and informs the thematic discussion in chapters 4–7.

Chapter 3 introduces the sites at Hornbrekka and Víðivellir and the families that lived there. Both farms were home to families that chose to emigrate and settle in Canada. In seeking to understand their decisions, their choices must be contextualised within their particular life histories. To successfully interpret the archaeological material it is necessary to provide a detailed account of the people who interacted with the sites and along with

varied assemblages of things created the very conditions that made them suitable for excavation. The chapter, furthermore, provides a historical background to 19th-century Iceland and the establishment of the Icelandic colony in Manitoba, Canada.

Chapter 4, *Becoming Canadian*, discusses the concept of ethnicity. It suggests that the Icelanders had to be Icelandic in order to become Canadian, dissolving the dichotomy that denies continuity of Icelandicness through the formation of a new immigrant identity. The chapter draws on written resources that discuss the contact Icelanders had with other cultures and contextualises them in the discourse of Icelandic nationalism and the racial discourse in Canada. It demonstrates how research into material culture exchanges in the colony adds a new dimension to historical research into cultural encounters.

Chapter 5, *Becoming Wealthy*, discusses subsistence strategies during the emigration period at the two households and seeks to destabilise a narrative of axiomatic material advancement. It draws on zooarchaeological material and the portable material culture from the excavations at Hornbrekka and Víðivellir, as well as on various historical resources such as store ledgers. The chapter seeks to emphasise the continuities and improvisations that were involved in economic subsistence strategies both in Iceland and in Canada. It brings forward the experiences of the families, that complicate economic models that assume a progressive development from self-sufficiency to capitalist market relations.

Chapter 6, *Becoming Refined*, discusses gender roles and ideologies of improvement and domesticity in Iceland and New Iceland in the late 19th century. The chapter draws from ethnographic sources and the excavated material culture from the two sites to shed light on the domestic tasks of serving food, dining, and cleaning. The chapter compares the two households and demonstrates that improvement ideology and changing domestic arrangements from the mid-19th century onwards played an important role in peoples' lives. Improvement was one of the draws of emigration, particularly for women, and it was an integral part of making home in Canada as well as in Iceland.

Chapter 7, *Becoming Modern*, considers the concept of modernity through an exploration of the architecture and structural remains of the two farms. It discusses Icelandic vernacular architecture and the building traditions in the Icelandic reserve. By combining analysis of architectural developments, maintenance, and refurbishment with the biographies of the families, the chapter sets out to promote an understanding of a building-and-dwelling process that is inherently intermingled and complex.

This book criticises the grand narrative that depicts Icelanders in Iceland as traditional and the decision to emigrate and settle in Canada as a move towards modernity. The archaeology of the emigration from

Iceland to New Iceland illustrates the complexity of cultural encounters. It demonstrates how the emigrants negotiated discourses of nationalism and racism, and ideologies of capitalism, improvement, and refined domesticity. These negotiations led to changes in identity, subsistence strategies and material culture that are measurable when two given points in time are compared; however, such an analysis ignores the process of *becoming* which carries importance in and of itself. By focusing on the continuities that are maintained through change this process can be brought to the forefront of the discussion and facilitate a more nuanced, detailed, and meaningful account of migration.

