

An Experiment in Immigrant Colonization:
Canada and the Icelandic Reserve, 1875-1897

by

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Abstract

In October 1875 the Canadian government reserved a tract of land along the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg for the exclusive use of Icelandic immigrants. This was part of a larger policy of reserving land for colonization projects involving European immigrants with a common ethno-religious background. The purpose of this policy was to promote the rapid resettlement and agricultural development of Aboriginal territory in the Canadian Northwest. The case of the Icelandic reserve, or *Nýja Ísland* (New Iceland), provides a revealing window into this policy, and the ways in which it intersected with the larger processes of colonization in the region during the late nineteenth century.

The central problem that this study addresses is the uneasy fit between "colonization reserves" such as New Iceland and the political, economic and cultural logic of nineteenth-century liberalism. Earlier studies have interpreted group settlements as either aberrations from the "normal" pattern of pioneer individualism or communitarian alternatives to it. This study, by contrast, argues that colonization reserves were part of a spatial regime that reflected liberal categories of difference that were integral to the extension of a new liberal colonial order in the region.

Using official documents, immigrant letters and contemporary newspapers, this study examines the Icelandic colonists' relationship to the Aboriginal people they displaced, to other settler groups, and to the Canadian state. It draws out the tensions between the designs and perceptions of government officials in Ottawa and Winnipeg, the administrative machinery of the state, and the lives and strategies of people attempting to navigate shifting positions within colonial hierarchies of race and culture.

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The roots of this project extend back to Vogar, Manitoba, a Métis village with an Icelandic name bordering a Euro-Canadian ranching community on one side and the Lake Manitoba First Nation on the other. That is where I began, and the imprint of that beginning has helped shape me as a person and as a historian. I would like to thank my family for their support and understanding during this long process. Yes, I am done.

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Introduction:
“A Special Experiment of Immigrant Colonization”

On 18 September 1877 the Canadian Ministers of Agriculture and Interior and their top deputies visited New Iceland, a reserve for Icelandic immigrants on the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg. Two weeks later the Toronto *Globe* published an account of this “ministerial inspection” that also included an overview of the troubled history of this “special experiment of immigrant colonization”; since the arrival of the first group in the fall of 1875, the Icelandic colonists had endured hunger, crop failures, and disease, including an outbreak of smallpox that resulted in the colony being placed under rigid quarantine for almost ten months. The anonymous *Globe* correspondent noted that even though the Department of Agriculture’s Immigration Branch had “spent and loaned...large sums of public money...to establish this settlement” its future was still in doubt. He explained that the Ministers were there to assess the situation for themselves, and to determine whether government support for Icelandic immigration and colonization should continue into the future.¹ This was a matter of politics as well as policy; opponents of Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie’s Liberals had cited the Icelandic colony as an example of the government’s failed colonization policy. These critics accused government officials of making a grave error in the choice of colony site, and accused the Icelanders of being an “effete and unprogressive race...not equal to the struggle of life on this continent and must inevitabl[y] succumb to the fate of the “least fit.”²

¹ *Globe*, 2 October 1877.

² *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 25 September 1877. See also *Manitoba Herald*, 11 and 18 January 1877.

The *Globe* correspondent defended the government against the accusations of incompetence and negligence and painted an alternate picture of the Icelanders as worthy colonists. “If the site and the people were altogether unsuited to each other, and that if the consequence of such error had been, not only considerable waste of public money, but the infliction of suffering and death on large numbers of innocent and unsophisticated people...then the Immigration Department and all concerned would be justly subject to severe reproach. But what are the facts?”³ He asserted that the Icelanders were an orderly, literate, and hardworking people intent on achieving social and material progress. Therefore, “the experiment of this colony may be pronounced a success.”⁴ Unknown to *Globe* readers was the fact that the author was none other than John Lowe, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, and thus one of the people principally responsible for orchestrating the colonization scheme.⁵ However, Lowe’s article was not only an attempt to whitewash the failures of this one particular colony. It was also a defense of a whole mode of colonization in which the state took an active role in encouraging group immigration and settlement on reserved tracts of land. He asserted “aided colonization in communities is nothing new on this continent. It has succeeded where it has been properly looked after.”⁶

* * *

³ *Globe*, 2 October 1877.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A few days after its publication, Lowe sent a copy of the *Globe* article to Canada’s Emigration Agent in London William Annand. “I may tell you (this, however, quite privately) that I wrote the article in question.” Library and Archives Canada [hereafter referred to as LAC], Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17 [hereafter RG 17], “English and Continental Letterbooks” series [hereafter A I 8], reel T-158, volume 1666, page 126, John Lowe to William Annand, 19 October 1877.

⁶ *Ibid.*

This study examines the role of land reserves for European immigrants in the colonization of the Canadian Northwest during the late nineteenth century. The practice of reserving land for European ethno-religious communities groups was an important part of the Canadian state's immigration and land settlement policies during this period. "Colonization reserves" were part of a patchwork of reserved spaces in Manitoba and the North-West Territories; they were created at the same time and shared borders with reserves for Aboriginal groups and private corporations, such as the Hudson's Bay Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway (see figure 0.1). Even areas that were "open" for homesteading by individuals were in effect reserved, in that they were spaces designated for the exclusive use of incoming settlers. The 1876 Indian Act stipulated that "No Indian or non-treaty Indian...shall be held capable of having acquired or acquiring a homestead...right to...any surveyed or unsurveyed lands..."⁷

The reserve system developed out of a process of negotiation and contestation as indigenous peoples pushed for the recognition of their claims to the region's resources, and as European migrants, who had the option of locating in any one of several settlement frontiers, negotiated the conditions under which they would settle in Canadian territory. The "Half-breed" reserves were created as a result of the 1870 Manitoba Act after the Métis mounted an armed resistance to Canadian rule. Indian reserves were established as part of the southern numbered treaties between 1871 and 1877. From the Canadian state's perspective, the Manitoba Act and the treaties granted limited recognition to Aboriginal rights and minimized the threat of further armed conflict in the region, while at the same time legitimizing the appropriation and redistribution of

⁷ *An Act to Amend and Consolidate the Laws Respecting Indians, Acts of the Parliament of the Dominion of Canada*, 39 Vic. (1876), c. 18, s. 70 at 64.

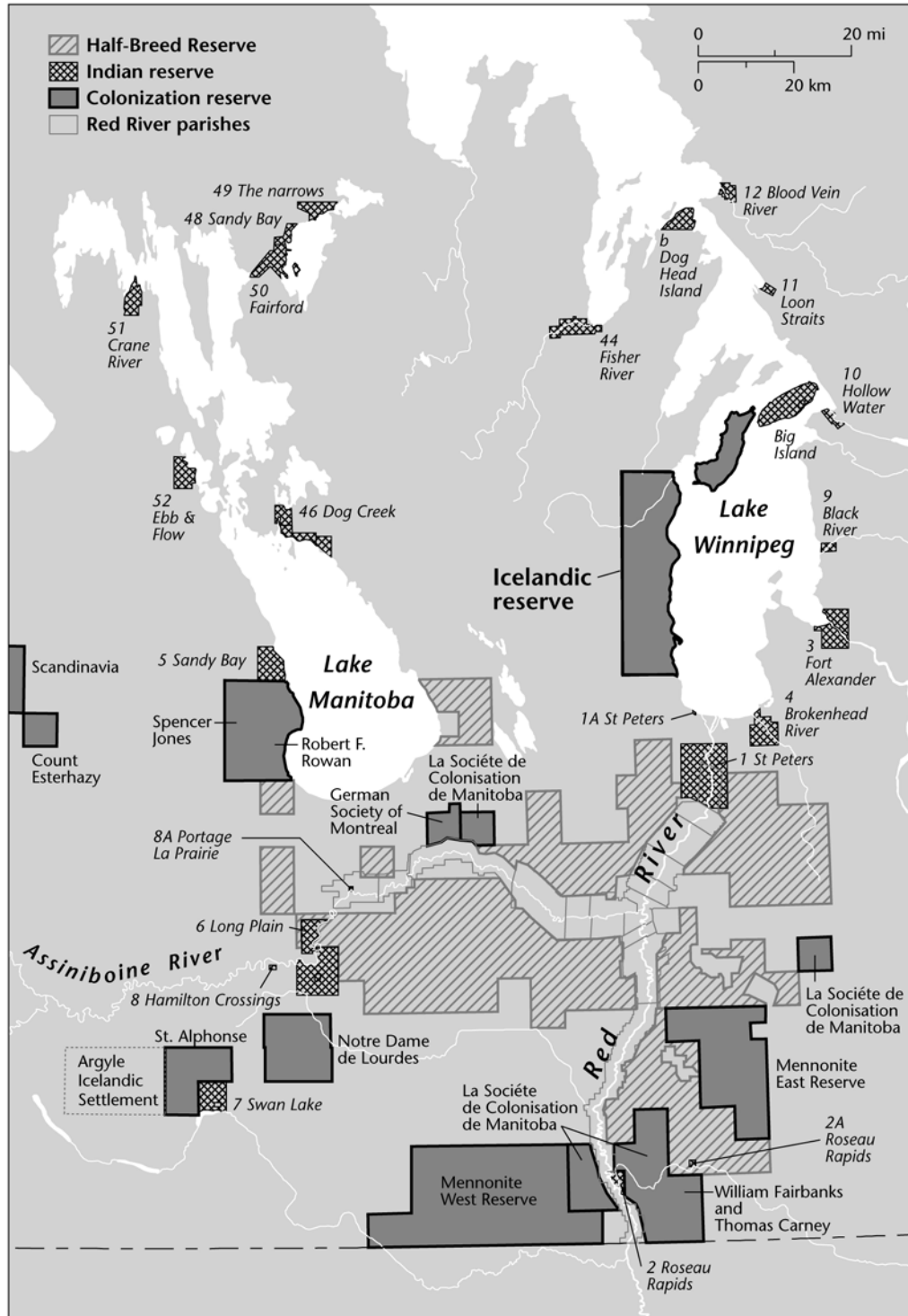


Figure 0.1. Reserved Lands in Manitoba, 1870-1886. Map by Eric Leinberger, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia.

territory for agricultural and commercial development.⁸ The legal and administrative vehicle for that redistribution was the 1872 Dominion Lands Act, which established rules for homestead lands and, after 1874, colonization reserves. Administratively, the practice of reservation was carried out through the Department of the Interior. While the Department's Dominion Lands Branch created colonization reserves in concert with the Department of Agriculture's Immigration Branch, its Indian Affairs Branch negotiated treaties and allocated Indian reserves. After 1892, responsibility for immigration also came under the Department of the Interior's expansive mandate.

The southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg, in the Interlake region of what is now Manitoba, was established as a "reserve for Icelanders" in October 1875. This tract was one of the earliest colonization reserves in the Northwest.⁹ It retained its reserve status until July 1897 when it was opened to "any class of settlers who may wish to locate in that vicinity."¹⁰ This area had been identified as having potential as an agricultural settlement as early as 1858, when Canadian geologist Henry Youle Hind examined it during his Assiniboine and Saskatchewan expedition.¹¹ The Canadian government created the Icelandic reserve to encourage the increasing numbers of Icelandic immigrants arriving on Canada's shores to settle in the Northwest. During the mid-nineteenth century, a growing population combined with adverse environmental conditions put pressure on Iceland's traditional rural society. Interest in emigration

⁸ J. R. Miller, *Compact, Contract, Covenant: Aboriginal Treaty-Making in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 152-56.

⁹ LAC, Privy Council Office fonds, RG 2 [hereafter RG 2], "Orders-in-Council" series [hereafter A I a], reel C-3313, volume 338, PC 1875-0987, 8 October 1875.

¹⁰ LAC, RG 2, A I a, reel C-3658, volume 74, PC 1897-2306, 7 July 1897.

¹¹ Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858* (London: Longman Green Longman and Roberts, 1860), 10-11.

developed during the 1860s and after 1870 a few individuals and small groups of young people began moving to Wisconsin. Only one of these first migrants, twenty-year old Sigtryggur Jónasson, chose to settle in Canada. In 1873, the Scottish Canadian Allan Steamship Line helped transform Icelandic emigration into a mass migration of whole families. The Dominion and Ontario governments worked with the Allan Line to redirect Icelandic migration to Canada by offering various subsidies. Early settlement experiments in Ontario were largely a failure, and in the spring of 1875 Baptist missionary John Taylor petitioned the Dominion government to relieve the suffering of the Icelandic immigrants in the province. That summer the Departments of Agriculture and Interior sent Taylor, Sigtryggur Jónasson and four other Icelanders to examine lands in Manitoba or the North-West Territories with the goal of finding a tract that would be suitable for an Icelandic colony. They selected an area along the west coast of Lake Winnipeg, extending fifty miles north from the 1870 provincial boundary. The first group of approximately 250 settlers arrived at Willow Point near the southern end of the reserve on 21 October 1875. The Icelanders called their colony *Nýja Ísland* (New Iceland) and soon after founded the village of *Gimli*, named for the paradise where, according to ancient Norse mythology, the gods and heroes would live after the end of the world. From its inception until the first decade of the twentieth century, New Iceland was important both as a destination for Icelandic migrants, and as a ‘mother colony’ that spawned other settlements in Canada and the United States. Between 1870 and 1914 approximately 15,000 to 20,000 Icelanders—roughly one quarter of Iceland’s

population—came to North America.¹² More than 80 per cent of these people settled initially in Canada.

The Minister of the Interior consented to the Icelanders' request in spite of competing claims from local Aboriginal groups to have one or more Indian reserves established in the same location.¹³ The region was home to Cree, Ojibwa and Métis people who combined hunting, fishing, and agriculture with involvement in the fur-trade as trappers, suppliers of country produce, and wage-labourers.¹⁴ By the early 1870s, permanent settlements had developed at several fur trade posts and mission stations around Lake Winnipeg, including the area around the Little White Mud River in what became the Icelandic reserve.¹⁵ The Ojibwa and Cree bands that negotiated Treaty 1 with the Canadian government in 1871 claimed the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg as part of an extensive Indian reserve. However, Canadian negotiators intent on keeping reserve size to a minimum rejected their claim.¹⁶ In 1874 a group of Cree from Norway House petitioned Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris for a reserve in this location.¹⁷ This

¹² Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and Steinþór Heiðarsson, *Framtíð handan hafis: Vesturfarir frá Íslandi, 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003), 83-104.

¹³ Frank Tough, *'As Their Natural Resources Fail': Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870-1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 80-81.

¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 14-43. For more on the pre-1870 history of the Cree and Ojibwa people in the region, see Laura Lynn Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780 to 1870* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1994); Victor P. Lytwyn, *Muskegowuck Athinuwick: Original People of the Great Swampy Land* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Church Missionary Society [hereafter CMS], CC 1 O 57, reel 55, Rev. James Settee annual report, 23 November 1875.

¹⁶ Tough, *'As Their Natural Resources Fail'*, 91-97.

¹⁷ See LAC, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development fonds, RG 10 [hereafter RG 10], Black series, reel C-10107, volume 3613, file 4060, "Norway House Agency – Correspondence Regarding the Removal of Indians from Norway House to Grassy Narrows, 1875."

request was looked upon favourably until the Icelandic delegation chose the site for their reserve.¹⁸ In the ensuing negotiations for Treaty 5, the Norway House Cree were redirected to Fisher River. A year later, the Canadian treaty negotiators rejected a request from the residents of the existing Aboriginal settlement for a reserve at Little White Mud River, which had been renamed Icelander's River by the colonists.¹⁹

The case of the Icelandic reserve/New Iceland is used here to explore the ideas, practices, and processes that were integral to the building of a new colonial society in the Canadian Northwest between 1870 and 1900. It examines the internal dynamics of colonization by detailing the Icelandic colonists' relationship to the Aboriginal people they displaced, to other settler groups, and the Canadian state. In the process, it draws out the tensions between the designs and perceptions of government officials in Ottawa and Winnipeg, the administrative machinery of the state, and the lives and strategies of people at the local level attempting to navigate their shifting positions within the new order.

The central problem that the study addresses is the uneasy fit between colonization reserves and the political, economic and cultural logic of nineteenth-century liberalism, which, Ian McKay has argued, fundamentally shaped Canada in the century between 1840 and 1940.²⁰ According to McKay, Canada in this period was,

¹⁸ Archives of Manitoba [hereafter AM], Alexander Morris Papers, MG 12, B1, no. 1066, Icelandic Deputation to Morris, 3 August 1875.

¹⁹ Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*, 80-81. LAC, RG 17, "General Correspondence" series [hereafter A I 1] volume 140, docket 14663, John Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

²⁰ Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (2000): 617-45. See also Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

“...simultaneously...an *extensive* projection of liberal rule across a large territory and an *intensive* process of subjectification, whereby liberal assumptions are internalized and normalized within the dominion’s subjects.”²¹ Where do immigrant colonization reserves, with their collective rights to land use and varying degrees of cultural autonomy, fit into this picture? Traditionally, it has been asserted that they do not fit at all; in the 1930s, political economist W.A. Mackintosh, echoing American historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, asserted that immigrant group settlements were an aberration from the “normal” type of settlement in which a pioneer individualist breaks away from traditional paths and seeks freedom on the open frontier.²² This study puts Mackintosh's interpretation of colonization reserves to the test. How did these reserves relate to the homestead system based on individualized, freehold tenure? Were colonization reserves islands of social, economic, cultural and political autonomy from mainstream Anglo-Canadian settler society?

The argument presented here is that immigrant colonization reserves—and the broader patchwork of reserved spaces of which they were a part—were an integral rather than exceptional part of the development of a new liberal colonial order in the Canadian Northwest. As a state policy, these reserves reflected the various “systematic” approaches to colonization that liberal thinkers developed during the course of the nineteenth century, and which were applied in diverse contexts across the British Empire and in the United States.

²¹ McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework," 623.

²² W.A. Mackintosh, foreword to Carl A. Dawson, *Group Settlement: Ethnic Communities in Western Canada* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1936), ix.

The spatial practice of reservation helped ensure peaceful relations between Aboriginal people, the Dominion government, and migrant settlers in Manitoba and the North-West Territories during the 1870s. Canadian officials aspired to both replicate and improve upon the experience of the U.S. West. They hoped to duplicate the republic's successful efforts in attracting thousands of European agricultural settlers, but at the same time wanted to avoid the costly Indian wars that had accompanied American westward expansion. Attenuated lines of communication, a tiny settler population, and the Canadian state's limited financial, military and administrative capacities made any attempt to use coercive measures to acquire Aboriginal territory a hazardous gambit. Indian reserves were a mechanism to help ensure that Aboriginal people did not resist colonization militarily, while immigrant reserves were used as an incentive to encourage agricultural settlers to apply their labour and capital to the development of Western lands. For both Aboriginal people and settlers, reserved lands held the promise of securing collective interests against the claims of other competing groups and of guaranteeing relative autonomy from centralized authority. Reserves seemed to offer a stable base of land and resources that would allow for a syncretic adaptation to the new order. For example, in the 1870s and 80s, farmers on Indian reserves in the Treaty 4 area and Mennonites on reserves in southern Manitoba both demonstrated that traditional modes of life, culture, and religion could coexist with new patterns of economic activity.²³ It was precisely this promise of being able to reestablish ties of kin, community, and culture in a resource-rich environment, closely tied to local and continent-wide markets by the

²³ See Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

railway, that led the Icelandic delegates to choose the reserve site on Lake Winnipeg in 1875.

The paradox of such reserves was that while they promised their residents autonomy within a limited sphere, they also created opportunities for regimes of surveillance and projects of social engineering. Reserves were tutelary spaces where, under the watchful eye of state administrators, citizens could be made. The fact that the Canadian government considered Indian reserves to be “social laboratories where the Indian could be ‘civilized’ and prepared for coping with the European” is well known.²⁴ However, many of the same discourses about civilization and assimilation were applied to non-English speaking European immigrants settled within reserved spaces. As with Indian reserves, Canadian government officials envisioned the day when immigrant reserves would cease to exist and their residents would be fully assimilated members of Canadian society.²⁵ The expected timelines were dramatically different, as were the levels of coercion and interference deemed necessary to achieve the desired ends. These differences were encoded in the unique legal and administrative regimes that governed the two different types of reserves. In the case of Aboriginal people, it was the various Indian acts, beginning with the 1857 Gradual Civilization Act, which defined Indians as a distinct category of non-citizens in Canada. The “enfranchisement” provisions of these laws laid out a complex process by which an individual could renounce their Indian status and attain Canadian citizenship in ways that made it difficult or undesirable for

²⁴ John L. Tobias, "Protection, Civilization, and Assimilation: An Outline History of Canada's Indian Policy," *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1976): 15.

²⁵ Rod Bantjes, *Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 32.

individuals to exercise this option. Indeed, few ultimately did.²⁶ Immigrant reserves were governed by the provisions of the 1872 Dominion Lands Act (DLA), which laid out a far simpler path to citizenship; immigrant aliens were required to become naturalized British subjects as part of the process of obtaining title to a 160-acre homestead. In this sense, the DLA was a compact between immigrant settlers and the Canadian state in which political and civil rights were granted in exchange for adopting practices in relation to landed property consistent with notions of ‘improvement.’²⁷

Although the colonial state unquestionably granted European settlers on colonization reserves, such as the Icelanders, many more advantages *vis-à-vis* their Indian reserve neighbours, the path to land ownership and full citizenship was not always straightforward. Much to the chagrin of the settlers themselves, Canadian authorities often treated the Icelandic reserve as a space inhabited by a group of people who required tutelage before they could be entrusted with liberal rights and freedoms. The colony’s problems in its first years tended to reinforce this image of the Icelanders as a backwards race, refugees from the ancient European past, whose fitness for the business of colonization in the modern west was suspect at best.²⁸

²⁶ For more on the enfranchisement policy, see John S. Milloy, "The Early Indian Acts: Developmental Strategy and Constitutional Change," in *As Long as the Sun Shines and the Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies*, ed. I.A.L. Getty and A.S. Lussier (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), 56-64; Robin Jarvis Brownlie, "'A Better Citizen Than Lots of White Men': First Nations Enfranchisement -- an Ontario Case Study, 1918-1940," *Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (2006): 29-52.

²⁷ On improvement as an ideology of landholding, see John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

²⁸ LAC, Department of the Secretary of State fonds, RG 6, [hereafter RG 6], "General Correspondence" series [hereafter A 1] volume 28, file 536, Lt. Governor of Manitoba transmits report by Dr. S.S. [sic] Lynch on condition of the Icelandic settlement, Lake Winnipeg, 1877.

Reserve homestead lands represented potential private property, and the Icelanders represented potential citizens. The actualization of this potential was predicated on the Icelanders' adoption of explicitly liberal modes of economic, and social organization. The general rules of the Dominion's homestead system were at first applied indifferently within the Icelandic reserve's boundaries. When they were finally established, the process of obtaining a patent to a homestead was bound up not only with making certain improvements, but also with repaying loans that the government had made to each settler to get them started on the land. The delay in granting homestead patents in turn delayed the Icelanders' ability to exercise political rights.

But from the 1880s until the end of mass migration from Iceland in the first decades of the twentieth century Canadian officials praised the Icelanders as model immigrants because of their ability to learn English and willingness to integrate with the Anglo-Canadian community.²⁹ In the space of a generation, the Icelandic immigrants, although still forming a distinct ethnic community in western Canada, became tightly integrated with the dominant Anglo-Canadian group, and shared many of its basic goals and assumptions.³⁰

The Icelanders' dramatic transformation from impoverished, backwards reserve colonists to model citizens of the new Dominion was the result of the interplay between their strategies for adaptation, and Canadian perceptions about their racial identity.

²⁹ William Duncan Scott, "Immigration and Population," in *Canada and its Provinces: A History of the Canadian People and their Institutions by One Hundred Associates. Volume 7, section IV: The Dominion Political Evolution, part II* ed. Adam Shortt and Arthur G Doughty (Toronto: Glasgow, Brook & Company, 1914), 526-27.

³⁰ Anne Brydon, "Icelanders," in *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*, ed. Paul Robert Magocsi (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario and University of Toronto Press, 1999), 697.

Contemporary European racial theories posited that Icelanders *should* be among the dominant races of the earth. They were recruited and settled in the Northwest based on the belief, widely held among Canadian elites, that “northern peoples” were ideally suited to become colonists and future citizens.³¹ For their part, many Icelanders were anxious to define themselves in such a way so as to escape from exclusionary category of immigrant alien and claim the full civil and political rights accorded to the white British subjects of the Dominion through the process of naturalization. This process began in the Icelandic reserve, where the Icelanders drew a contrast between themselves and the region’s Aboriginal peoples. When the settlers demanded changes in the administration of their reserve, they did so by arguing that they should be treated in the same manner as other ‘civilized’ communities.³² This study therefore offers insights into the legal and cultural processes through which European immigrants in the Canadian Northwest acquired white racial identities.³³

The case of the Icelandic reserve provides an opportunity to rethink the place of non-English, non-French speaking European immigrants in the development of a liberal white settler-dominated colonial society in the Canadian Northwest. The Icelandic immigrants came from a society that was itself undergoing dramatic social, economic,

³¹ Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 129-30.

³² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 247, docket 25445, Petition from the Icelanders to the Dominion Government of Canada, March 1879.

³³ See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Rev. ed. (London;New York: Verso, 1999).

and political changes in which discourses of liberal freedom were central.³⁴ As reserve colonists they generally demonstrated a strong desire to escape restrictions built into the reserve-as-reformatory structure by establishing a community and a set of institutions based on liberal principles. At the same time, the colonists were not always in agreement about how to bring this about, or whether it was even possible in their particular location on Lake Winnipeg. For the disaffected, the government's slowness in extending individual property and political rights to the reserve, and the paternalistic tendencies of colonization agent John Taylor, were among their principal grievances. As they challenged their exclusion from the promises of liberal order, they at the same time helped extend its concepts and practices over a new terrain.

This process is documented by a wealth of primary source material generated by both the government and the Icelandic colonists. The records of the Department of Agriculture's Immigration Branch contains a large volume of correspondence between the Icelandic Agent John Taylor and John Lowe that provides both quantitative and qualitative information on all aspects of the colony's life in the 1870s and early 1880s. Because the great majority of the Icelandic migrants were literate, manuscript and published life-writings exist in abundance. These life-writings include letters, diaries, and newspaper articles. Important manuscript collections are held at the Archives of Manitoba, *Landsbókasafn Íslands* [The National Library of Iceland] and Archives and Special Collections and the Icelandic Collection, both at the University of Manitoba.³⁵

³⁴ See, for example, Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, "Defining the Modern Citizen: Debates on Civil and Political Elements of Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century Iceland," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 24, no. 1 (1999): 103-16.

³⁵ Some examples include AM, New Iceland collection, MG 8; Landsbókasafn Íslands [hereafter Lbs.] Halldór and Susie (Taylor) Briem letter collection; University of

Perspectives from the Icelandic migrants are also available in *Framfari* [*Progressive*], the newspaper published in New Iceland between 1877 and 1880.³⁶

In analyzing the Icelandic reserve as a project, or—to use John Lowe’s terminology—*experiment* in liberal colonization, this study employs theoretical insights from both Marxist and post-structuralist sources. In this sense it is closely related to postcolonial theory, which Leela Gandhi defines as an uneasy dialectic between these two diverse intellectual currents.³⁷ The analysis here draws on strengths of both; Marxism is well suited to describing the basic economic, political, and cultural structures framing social relations of production in colonial contexts, and for uncovering the strategies that subaltern peoples used to resist and reshape them.³⁸ Post-structuralism provides insights into the ways in which language and the material world intersect to produce knowledge systems and administrative practices that make certain actions seem possible and desirable, and which underpin various projects of rule. It reveals how the socially constructed categories of race, gender, and class shape both colonial and metropolitan societies.³⁹

Manitoba Archives and Special Collections [hereafter UMASC] Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04); University of Manitoba Icelandic Collection [hereafter UMIC] Friðjón Friðriksson papers.

³⁶ The full run of this newspaper is available in English. See George Houser, ed. *Framfari: 1877 to 1880* (Gimli, MB: Gimli Chapter Icelandic National League of North America, 1986).

³⁷ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), vii.

³⁸ Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review*, no. 82 (1973): 3-16.

³⁹ For a programmatic statement of the purposes and methods of this type of analysis, see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-58.

The Marxist influence on this study is most concretely registered in its approach to migration. The “systems approach” to migration developed by Dirk Hoerder and others “combines analysis of the position of a society of origin in the global order, its structures, the regional specifics, selection and self-selection of migrants from a reservoir of potential leavers and persisters, the process of migration itself, and—within the receiving societies’ structures—the insertion into partly internationalized labour markets, the formation of ethnic enclaves or of transcultural networks, and the interaction with new social values and norms.”⁴⁰ In analyzing the experience of the Icelanders, this study shares the concern of Hoerder and other social historians of migration who attempt to document the strategies that individuals, families, and groups used to adapt to their new circumstances in Canada.⁴¹

The post-structural elements of this study relate to its treatment of space, race, and power. Colonization reserves such as New Iceland were part of a process that brought territories and people in northwest North America into the administrative orbit of the Canadian state. Reservation was a tactic of spatial organization that, when bundled together with other tactics—such as the systematic survey, land registration, periodic censuses—produced specialized knowledge that made it possible for the Canadian state to govern the region.⁴² People and places were linked to one another, and the particular

⁴⁰ See Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 16-19.

⁴¹ See Dirk Hoerder, *Creating Societies: Immigrant Lives in Canada* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).

⁴² Similar to postcolonial theory, much of the literature on space also inhabits a middle ground between Marxism and post-structuralism. Some of the works that have shaped my thinking on the subject include Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); R. Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997); James C.

characteristics of each could be quantified and compared in the statistical languages of state administration.⁴³ How many Icelanders were there in the reserve? What was their birth rate and death rate? How many acres did they, on average, have under cultivation? After 1877, answers to these questions were at the fingertips of politicians and bureaucrats in Ottawa. Officials tasked with assessing the progress of the Icelandic colonization experiment could use these statistics to compare it to other colonization projects, and form judgments about its success or failure. Significantly, it was the Icelanders themselves who collected, aggregated, and transmitted much of this information through their own system of representative local government.

This type of government is the essence of Michel Foucault's concept of *governmentality*. Foucault argued that in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries a new mode of government developed that was different from the ways in which states had asserted their authority over people and territory in the past. Rather than simply imposing laws or using coercive means to induce compliance, government became a question of employing "...tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics—to arrange things in such a way that...such and such ends may be achieved."⁴⁴

The periodic census is a prime example of such tactics. It helped produce 'population' as

Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Kate Brown, "Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (2001): 17-48; R. Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); Bantjes, *Improved Earth*.

⁴³ Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 26.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 95.

a category, which in turn created new possibilities for the articulation of various administrative projects for improvement.⁴⁵ In utilizing this mode of government, the aim of the state was to shape the behaviour of its subjects in ways that served its larger purposes. To accomplish this, the people themselves needed to share those ambitions, or at least the set of assumptions about the proper social, political, and economic organization of society. In the context of the Canadian state's colonizing project in the Northwest during the late nineteenth-century, those assumptions were derived primarily from liberalism.

Any study that places liberalism and colonialism at the centre of analysis must inevitably grapple with the problem of defining these notoriously capacious terms. Extracting a workable definition of either from an existing body of political, economic, or social theory is easy enough; the difficulty comes in attempting to apply that abstract formula to an idiosyncratic historical context that inevitably deviates from any clear and stable precepts one can muster. The approach adopted here is to avoid rigid definitions in favour of a flexible set of parameters that delimit the field of inquiry in substantive ways, but which also leave scope for engaging the localized and historically contingent formations.

While there is little disagreement about the salient features of European overseas expansion from the fifteenth century onward—the development of global networks of trade and commerce, the appropriation of land and resources from indigenous peoples, and the creation of various settler societies through free and forced migration—the question of whether these various endeavours amounts to a uniform system, whose broad

⁴⁵ Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, 3.

global patterns definitively shape events in a multitude of local contexts, has been the subject of considerable debate. Nicholas Thomas has argued that global theories of colonialism—whether of the liberal or Marxist variety—obscure the incredible diversity of "colonial projects", both in different locations, and among the colonizers themselves. He calls for a reading of colonialism not as a "unitary project but a fractured one, riddled with contradictions and exhausted as much by its own internal debates as by the resistance of the colonized."⁴⁶ Robert J.C. Young, by contrast, is not willing to abandon general patterns for specific locales. He attempts to find a balance between the competing pulls of the global and the local by distinguishing between imperialism and colonialism as distinct but interconnected manifestations of 'empire.' For Young, empire-as-imperialism relates to the top-down exercise of bureaucratic control, the assertion and expansion of state power within a global political and economic system. By contrast, empire-as-colonialism relates to the more localized phenomena of settlement colonies or the activities of chartered trading companies. Whereas imperialism lends itself more readily to study as a concept, colonialism is best studied as a set of practices that, while they might be employed across multiple sites of empire, often took on a form specific to their locale.⁴⁷

In order to more precisely reflect this notion of colonialism as a process or set of practices, as well as the role of the state in shaping them, this study generally employs the term *colonization*. This was the term—rather than the more benign 'settlement'—that Canadian officials generally used to describe their efforts to radically transform

⁴⁶ Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 51.

⁴⁷ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 17-18.

northwestern North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. The methods that these state actors used to accomplish this goal were in large measure derived from the philosophical tenets and administrative practices of nineteenth century liberalism.⁴⁸

Ian McKay's definition of liberalism—drawn from the work of Fernande Roy and C.B. Macpherson⁴⁹—also attempts to balance general principles with shifting, context and time dependent, formations. At base, McKay argues, liberalism is predicated on the “epistemological and ontological primacy of the category ‘individual’...whose freedom should be limited only by voluntary obligations to others or to God, and by the rules necessary to obtain the equal freedom of other individuals.”⁵⁰ The rules and institutions that allow liberal individuals to live in community with one another are derived from three core principles: liberty, equality, and property. The importance accorded to each of these principles changes over time, which makes it possible to distinguish between the different historical forms of liberalism. McKay argues that the dominant form of “actually existing liberalism” in nineteenth-century Canada entailed “the formal equality of adult male individuals before the law, the liberty of some individuals to certain carefully delimited rights and freedoms, and...their freedom to acquire and defend

⁴⁸ For example, the title of the parliamentary committee that dealt with western settlement matters was the “Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization.”

⁴⁹ Fernande Roy, *Progrès, Harmonie, Liberté: Le libéralisme des milieux d'affaires francophones de Montréal au tournant du siècle* (Montréal: Boréal, 1988); C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁵⁰ McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework," 623-24.

private property.”⁵¹ According to McKay, property rights occupied the paramount position in this liberal triad, as one of several preconditions for the actualization of other liberal rights and freedoms. The primary strength of McKay’s definition is its flexibility and emphasis on historical contingency. By conceptualizing liberalism as a set of principles that are constantly being rearranged into unique formulations across space and time, ‘liberal order’ can be rendered as a dialectical process, in which the goals and tactics of the liberal state intersect with a plurality of hybrid, vernacular liberalisms, as well as ‘aliberal’ ways of thinking about personhood and organizing community.

Although this study uses McKay’s definition, it also incorporates some of the ways in which contributors to the recent collection *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* have suggested it might be usefully reconfigured.⁵² The most important for the purposes of this study relates to the tension between the universal capacities that liberal theory attributes to the category of ‘individual,’ and the exclusionary practices that restrict many people, notably women and racialized minorities, from exercising these rights in practice.⁵³ Several commentators draw on Uday Singh Mehta’s influential argument that such exclusions were integral to the very definition of the liberal individual. Mehta details how British theorists defined the liberal subject through a process of comparison that invoked developmental hierarchies of race and culture, and which made the actualization of universal capacities conditional upon

⁵¹ McKay, “Canada as a Long Liberal Revolution: On Writing the History of Actually Existing Canadian Liberalisms, 1840s-1940s,” in Constant and Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony*, 355.

⁵² Summarized in Constant and Ducharme, “Introduction: A Project of Rule Called Canada,” in *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵³ See especially Adele Perry, “Women, Racialized People, and the Making of the Liberal Order in Northern North America,” in *Ibid.*, 275.

colonial subjects becoming civilized in distinctly liberal ways. This sort of ordering of peoples was integral to meshing liberalism and empire by constructing an intellectual architecture that rationalized the subordinate status of colonized peoples.⁵⁴ In his more recent reflections on this question, McKay too has followed Mehta's lead to argue that instances of exclusion and subjugation that apparently betray liberal principles, such as the coercive practices of Indian residential schools, can be viewed as consistent with the revolutionary ambition of instilling liberal principles in a set of people imagined as backward and uncivilized.⁵⁵ This tutelary impulse was present in the Canadian state's approach to colonization, not only with regard to Aboriginal people but also in its relations with immigrant aliens such as the Icelanders. The Northwest was a vast laboratory of liberalism, inclusive of a variety of experiments, in which tactics of liberal government were mobilized in different measures among distinct collectivities within the colonial population.

McKay's call to view Canada as a "historically specific project of [liberal] rule" is one of the three historiographical currents that inform this study. His article "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History" outlines an analytic approach that is national in scope, but at the same time departs from overtly nationalist historiographies of English and French Canada. In the decade since the article first appeared, McKay's ideas have had been highly influential among historians of Canada working in both official languages in a wide range of subfields.⁵⁶ In this sense,

⁵⁴ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 47-49.

⁵⁵ McKay, "Canada as a Long Liberal Revolution," in Constant and Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony*, 387-88.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

the framework has largely fulfilled McKay's aim of building a bridge between traditional political and economic history with social history, as well as histories of state formation, law and order, and moral regulation informed by social and cultural theory, particularly the works of Gramsci and Foucault.⁵⁷ McKay's concept of liberal order shares its theoretical genealogy with this literature; his argument is framed in Gramscian terms,⁵⁸ but also includes what Bruce Curtis has called 'Foucault-creep' in the use of words such as 'panoptic,' 'discourse' and 'governmentality.'⁵⁹ Curtis claims that Foucault offers a better set of tools for analyzing the development of liberal modes of government than Gramsci. He cites in particular Foucault's conception of power as relational, networked, and widely diffused, as well as his ideas about the relationship between government of the self and techniques of government employed by the state.⁶⁰ McKay in turn argues that Foucauldians have generally misunderstood and oversimplified Gramsci's theories, which, he asserts, are sufficiently agile to address the question of governmental power with the same level of subtlety as Foucault.⁶¹ This theoretical dispute obscures the

⁵⁷ A few prominent examples from the latter category include, Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Bruce Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men?: Inspection, Education, and State Formation in Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Tina Loo, *Making Law, Order, and Authority in British Columbia, 1821-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ While there are few explicit references to Gramsci in the original article, McKay's more recent comments offer lengthy discussion of how the framework has been "developed in dialogue" with the Gramscian concepts of hegemony, historic bloc, and passive revolution. See McKay, "Canada as a Long Liberal Revolution" in Constant and Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony*, 363-67.

⁵⁹ Bruce Curtis, "After 'Canada': Liberalisms, Social Theory, and Historical Analysis," in *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 186-187.

⁶¹ McKay, "Canada as a Long Liberal Revolution," in *Ibid.*, 431n58.

similarities between their conceptual and methodological approaches. McKay and Curtis both argue that the liberal order is best studied historically as a process of simultaneous objectification and subjectification; a liberal mode of government was projected outward through the administrative apparatus of the centralized state, while at the same time being internalized by its subjects in ways that did not always serve the state's purposes. People on the periphery often mobilized liberalism's lexicon to critique the state and express alternative, syncretic visions of social order.⁶² While the Canadian state sometimes utilized coercion and surveillance to enforce compliance with its designs, particularly in its relations with Aboriginal people and other racialized minorities, liberal order was also produced in the Northwest through an ongoing process of negotiation and contestation between centre and margin that left both irreparably changed.

A similar perspective is at work in the recent literature on empire sometimes called the 'new imperial history'—the second historiographical current that this study draws upon. Scholars such as Christopher Bayly, Ann Laura Stoler, Antoinette Burton, Catherine Hall, Tony Ballantyne, Alan Lester and Elizabeth Elbourne have reconstructed the networks of production, communication, knowledge, and cultural exchange that bound various nodes of empire together, and have investigated how shifting social categories have informed various colonial projects.⁶³ Adele Perry's influential work on

⁶² Compare *Ibid.*, 364-365 with Curtis "After Canada," 192-194.

⁶³ C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Antoinette M. Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Alan

race and gender in British Columbia has grown out of, and alongside, this literature.⁶⁴

This study follows Perry's lead in attempting to move beyond the imagined economic, social, cultural, and geographic boundaries of the nation-state to reveal a wider set of connections that helped to shape colonial society in the Canadian Northwest.

Finally, this study draws insights from the social and cultural histories of migration and Aboriginal-settler interaction in Canada. Since the 1970s, these literatures have developed along parallel, but largely separate, tracks. Social historians of immigrant and Aboriginal communities have explored similar issues, including agency, class, racial, and gendered identities, family and household economy, and group relations with the Canadian state. They have generally shared an emphasis on the dialectical quality of cultural adaptation and change, and the admixture of accommodation and resistance.⁶⁵ In spite of these similarities, these two literatures have had remarkably little

Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001); Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

⁶⁴ Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Perry's work has helped prompt a more generalized renewal of interest in Canada place within the wider circuits of empire that has drawn the attention of a diverse collection of Canadian historians working from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. See Phillip A. Buckner, ed. *Canada and the British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ See, for example, Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role As Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989); Carter, *Lost Harvests*; Maureen K. Lux, *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Nicole J. M. St-Onge, *Saint-Laurent, Manitoba: Evolving Métis Identities, 1850-1914* (Regina, SK: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004); Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Metis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010). Some important

to say to one another. As Adele Perry has pointed out, the tendency to treat immigration and colonization as separate topics obscures how the dispossession of Aboriginal people and the building of a white settler population are fundamentally intertwined.⁶⁶ The challenge is not only to bring Aboriginal people, settlers, and the state into the same analytic frame, but also to draw out the internal complexity, and the dynamics of their relationships with one another.

This sort of perspective has been lacking in the existing literature that deals with immigrant reserves. In state-focused studies of Dominion Lands administration and western settlement, the practice of reservation is addressed as one aspect of an overarching lands policy aimed at facilitating mass migration, railway construction, and agricultural development through a mix of public and private initiatives.⁶⁷ Attempts to

examples of the social and cultural history of immigration and ethnicity from the Canadian context include Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984); Bruce S. Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (Montréal 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); Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); Frances Swyripa, *Wedded to the Cause: Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity, 1891-1991* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Hoerder, *Creating Societies*; Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities: Migration to Upper Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 19.

⁶⁷ See Arthur S. Morton and Chester Martin, *History of Prairie Settlement/"Dominion Lands" Policy* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1938); André Lalonde, "Settlement in the North-West Territories by Colonization Companies, 1881-1891" (PhD dissertation, Laval University, 1969); John Langton Tyman, "The Disposition of Farm Lands in Western Manitoba, 1870-1930: Studies in Prairie Settlement" (DPhil dissertation, Oxford University, 1970); James Morton Richtik, "Manitoba Settlement, 1870 to 1886" (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971); John Langton Tyman,

analyze immigrant group settlement as a separate phenomenon tended to contrast reserves with an idealized “normal” pattern of “individual” settlement that oversimplified the group and community aspects of British, Anglo-Canadian or American settlement.⁶⁸ The colonization of particular townships in Manitoba by Anglo-Canadians were just as much group settlements as their non-British counterparts in the sense that they were frequently composed of people from the same home region, linked by ties of kinship, ethnicity, and religion and who had travelled west together as part of organized migrations. They also shared similar economic strategies that combined market-oriented production and consumption with family and household strategies for self-sufficiency and intergenerational transfer of wealth.⁶⁹ These similarities were lost to early twentieth-century political economy and social research, which tended to associate group settlement with ethnic minorities who had gone out to the west to “escape a world which pressed heavily upon them not as individuals but as groups.”⁷⁰

During the 1930s, the sociologist Carl Dawson went beyond the realm of policy to examine actual social, economic and cultural lives of ethnic group settlements.

However, Dawson ultimately took a similar view, arguing that group settlement, or

By Section, Township and Range: Studies in Prairie Settlement (Brandon, MB: Assiniboine Historical Society, 1972); James M. Richtik, "The Policy Framework for Settling the Canadian West, 1870-1880," *Agricultural History* 49, no. 4 (1975): 613-28.

⁶⁸ Norman P. Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 197-256. For an important micro-study of an English speaking settler community in Manitoba, see D. M. Loveridge, "The Garden of Manitoba: The Settlement and Agricultural Development of the Rock Lake District and the Municipality of Louise, 1878-1902" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1987).

⁶⁹ See, for example, Bruce S. Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach*, 2nd ed. (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 185-91.

⁷⁰ W.A. Mackintosh, foreword to Dawson, *Group Settlement*, ix.

segregation as he referred to it, was the product of both the “natural desire of migrants to settle beside neighbours possessing the same language, religion and general culture” and state policies that permitted the practice. This tendency left many of these groups in a state of “arrested development” that delayed the “natural” process of assimilation into a Canadian social, economic and political system, “whose outstanding characteristic was an experimental individualism.”⁷¹ However, it is far from clear that there was a simple communal/individual binary that separated reserve and non-reserve settler communities from one another. Anthony W. Rasporich has drawn attention to the utopian aspects of community settlements in western Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing linkages between British, Anglo-Canadian and American, and continental European communities he identifies a plurality of “abortive utopias” that drew on diverse ideological currents ranging from the deeply conservative and religious to liberal-anarchist to socialist visions of a new order.⁷²

Since the 1970s, the idea that there is a one-way trajectory from cultural distinctiveness to assimilation, and that traditional cultures are antithetical to participation in the market economy has been challenged from a number of directions. Historical geographers have offered some important insights into the relationship between spatial organization and cultural change.⁷³ Social historians such as Royden Loewen and Kenneth Sylvester have turned Dawson’s conclusions on their head by arguing that, far

⁷¹ Ibid., xiii-xx.

⁷² A.W. Rasporich, "Utopian Ideals and Community Settlements in Western Canada, 1880-1914," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 352-77.

⁷³ See articles by Hansgeorg Schlichtmann, John C. Lehr, Donald T. Gale and Paul M. Koroscil, and Richard J. Friesen in *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 9, no. 2 (1977): 8-89.

from arresting development, economic and social patterns built on shared ties of language, religion, and culture were crucial to migrants' successful adaptation. Older patterns of life intersected with new ones, a process that allowed the migrants to balance household and community-based economic strategies with growing participation in the market economy.⁷⁴ However, these social histories of group settlement say relatively little about the role of the state in planning, sponsoring and carrying out these group settlement projects. An interesting new perspective has been added by Rod Bantjes, who reinterprets group settlements using insights from Foucault. Bantjes sees reserves as largely the product of a relatively weak state acquiescing to the demands of subject populations for "asylums from the cruel forces of political economy."⁷⁵ He demonstrates how in practice, these reserves were less asylums than reformatories where subordinate populations could be acclimatized to the demands of liberal political economy. Governmental apparatuses, particularly the survey grid, transport networks, individualized land tenure, and the state education system, slowly undermined the patterns of communal settlement and production.⁷⁶ This renewed focus on state power is important, but runs the risk of resurrecting the false dichotomy between group settlement and the supposedly "normal" pattern of settlement, with the former inherently communitarian and the latter competitive and individualistic, that does not hold up to micro-level analysis. Even when the intent is to demonstrate how governmental mechanisms internalized liberal principles of self-rule, it is easy for this process to be

⁷⁴ See Loewen, *Family, Church and Market*; Kenneth Michael Sylvester, *The Limits of Rural Capitalism: Family, Culture, and Markets in Montcalm, Manitoba, 1870-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

⁷⁵ Bantjes, *Improved Earth*, 32.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

reduced to a top-down exercise in social control. The challenge in studying land reservation and group settlement is to capture not only the relationship between the state and the people on the reserves, but also the internal debates within reserve communities. A microhistory approach is well suited to this task; the analysis presented here draws methodological insights from other studies of agricultural migrants that are often transnational in scope, while at the same time offering detailed examinations of particular local contexts in Canada and the United States.⁷⁷

This approach has thus far been absent in the literature on Icelandic immigrants. In comparison to other European ethnic groups, there have been relatively few scholarly works that address the migration and resettlement experiences of the Icelanders in North America. Until recently, celebratory community histories from the 1950s and 60s, emphasizing material progress and the personal achievements of Canadians or Americans of Icelandic descent, remained the standard general works on the subject.⁷⁸ Two more

⁷⁷ Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration From Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert Clifford Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835-1915* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Lyle Dick, *Farmers "Making Good": The Development of Abernethy District, Saskatchewan, 1880-1920* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites, Canadian Parks Service, 1989); J. I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848-1881* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991); Loewen, *Family, Church and Market*; Catharine Anne Wilson, *A New Lease on Life: Landlords, Tenants and Immigrants in Ireland and Canada* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Sylvester, *The Limits of Rural Capitalism*; R. W. Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and Practices of Resettlement on Saltspring Island, 1859-1891* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

⁷⁸ Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson and Tryggvi J. Oleson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, 5 vols. (Winnipeg and Reykjavík: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1940-1953); 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:

recent monographs are in large measure derived from these earlier histories, and do not engage with the wider literature on migration and ethnicity.⁷⁹ Apart from a few articles and one master's thesis, the Icelanders were largely absent from the great upsurge in immigration and ethnic history in academic circles in Canada and the United States during the 1970s and 80s.⁸⁰ One important exception is Nelson Gerrard's 1985 study of the Icelandic River district of New Iceland *Icelandic River Saga*. Although presented in the format of a western Canadian community history book, *Icelandic River Saga* reflects a level of careful primary and secondary research that has more in common with detailed microhistorical studies of rural communities.⁸¹

However, historians from Iceland have provided valuable insights into the background, processes, and demographic character of emigration from Iceland in the period 1870 to 1914. During the 1970s, Jónius H. Kristinsson and Helgi Skúli

Wallingford Press, 1965); Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Winnipeg: Viking Press, 1967).

⁷⁹ Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000); Jónas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002).

⁸⁰ John S. Matthiasson, "Icelandic Canadians in Central Canada: One Experiment in Multiculturalism," *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (1974): 49-61; John S. Matthiasson, "The Icelandic Canadians: The Paradox of an Assimilated Ethnic Group," in *Two Nations, Many Cultures: Ethnic Groups in Canada*, ed. Jean Elliott (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1979), 331-41; Jónas Þór, "A Religious Controversy Among Icelandic Immigrants in North America, 1874-1880" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1980); Howard Palmer, "Escape from the Great Plains: The Icelanders in North Dakota and Alberta," *Great Plains Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1983): 219-23; Jane McCracken, "Stephan G. Stephansson: Icelandic-Canadian Poet and Freethinker," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 15, no. 1 (1983): 33-53; James M. Richtik, "Chain Migration Among Icelandic Settlers in Canada to 1891," *Scandinavian Canadian Studies* 2 (1986): 73-88; Mary Kinnear, "The Icelandic Connection: Freyja and the Manitoba Woman Suffrage Movement," *Canadian Woman Studies* 7, no. 4 (1986): 25-28.

⁸¹ Nelson Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985). A three-volume follow-up, focusing on the Gimli district of New Iceland, *Gimlunga Saga*, is forthcoming.

Kjartansson explored the general patterns and local manifestations of Iceland's short-lived but intense emigration movement. Prior to his untimely death in 1983, Kristinsson compiled a nominal record of 14,268 emigrants based on parish registers, passenger contracts and emigrant reminiscences.⁸² Kjartansson has used this data to produce several articles on the demographic character of Icelandic emigration, and has elaborated on the role of shipping in fostering the movement.⁸³ His recent monograph, co-authored by Steinþór Heiðarsson, compiles and expands on these contributions.⁸⁴ While Kjartansson and Heiðarsson offer a comprehensive analysis of Icelandic emigration informed by the international literature on migration, they do not extend their analysis to the development of Icelandic communities in Canada and the United States. A few recent publications and graduate theses have begun to fill this void, but much more work remains to be done.⁸⁵

⁸² Jóníus Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of Emigrants from Iceland to America, 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983).

⁸³ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "The Onset of Emigration from Iceland," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 9, no. 1 (1977): 87-93; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Emigrant Fares and Emigration from Iceland to North America, 1874-1893," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 28, no. 1 (1980): 53-71; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration," in *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe*, ed. P. C. Emmer and Magnus Mörner (New York: Berg, 1992), 105-19.

⁸⁴ See Kjartansson and Heiðarsson, *Framtíð handan hafs*.

⁸⁵ Anne Brydon, "Dreams and Claims: Icelandic-Aboriginal Interactions in the Manitoba Interlake," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2001): 164-90; Ryan C. Eyford, "Icelandic Migration to Canada, 1872-1875: New Perspectives on the 'Myth of Beginnings'" (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2003); Laurie K. Bertram, "'Fight Like Auður': Gender, Ethnicity, and Dissent in the Career of Salome Halldorson, Social Credit MLA, 1936-41," (MA cognate research paper, McMaster University, 2004); Ryan C. Eyford, "From Prairie Goolies to Canadian Cyclones: The Transformation of the 1920 Winnipeg Falcons," *Sport History Review* 37, no. 1 (2006): 5-18; Ryan C. Eyford, "Quarantined within a New Colonial Order: The 1876-1877 Lake Winnipeg Smallpox Epidemic," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17 (2006): 55-78; C. Lesley

This study offers insights into the establishment of the Icelandic immigrant community in the trans-border west, but also seeks to situate it within a broader contextual frame of western colonization and liberal transformation. Chapter 1 examines the convergence of Icelandic mass migration and Canadian expansionism in the mid-1870s. The focus is on how the immigration policies and practices of the Canadian state reflected contemporary thinking about the relationship between race and nation building. Chapter 2 traces the roots of land reservation and group settlement in the history of British colonialism, and explores how the Canadian state used these practices as part of its efforts to colonize Northwest North America after 1870. Group settlements of white families were believed by influential thinkers on colonial questions to be the most efficient method of colonization. The study then shifts to examine the experience of the Icelandic colonists in more detail. Through an analysis of the first group of settlers, chapter 3 provides a detailed picture of the origins of the migrants in Iceland, the demographic character of the migration, the motivations of the migrants, and their settlement patterns in the reserve. Chapter 4 explores the processes through which the Icelanders displaced the Aboriginal inhabitants of the reserve. It focuses on the smallpox epidemic of 1876-77—the pivotal event in the colony's early history—in which the practices of public health and land administration served to reinforce one another. John Taylor, the Canadian government's 'Icelandic Agent' is the subject of Chapter 5. Over the course of his long life Taylor was, in succession, a convicted slave trader in Barbados, a Baptist missionary in Ontario, and a Canadian colonization agent in the Northwest. As “principal projector” of the Icelandic colony Taylor employed a paternalistic style of

Biggs and Stella Stephanson, "In Search of Gudrun Goodman: Reflections on Gender, 'Doing History' and Memory," *Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (2006): 293-316.

administration that won him both close friends and bitter enemies among the Icelanders. Chapter 6 examines the efforts of the Icelanders to govern themselves within their reserve through the creation of a unique municipal system. This local government was critical to the Icelanders' emergence as political subjects aligned with the norms and assumptions of the liberal state, although some Canadian legislators were hesitant to grant them political rights before they had become property owners and naturalized British subjects. The problems that the Icelanders had in converting their homestead claims within the reserve into private property are the subject of the final chapter. It explores how the Canadian government attempted to use the loan it granted to the Icelanders as leverage in a futile attempt to hold the crumbling colony together. In this protracted dispute, the issues of indebtedness became intertwined with personal liberty, citizenship and gender.

This study of the Icelandic reserve offers an opportunity to draw linkages between two historiographies—immigration history and the history of colonialism—that have often had little to say to one another, particularly in the Canadian context. The arrival of Icelanders in the Lake Winnipeg region was part of the profound changes experienced by the Ojibwa, Cree, and mixed-blood inhabitants of the region in the years after 1870. Economically, these changes included the restructuring of the fur-trade economy, the creation of Indian reserves, and the development of new resource industries. At the same time, the legal and institutional framework of a new cultural order was being articulated through the efforts of Indian agents and missionaries tasked with bringing about Aboriginal compliance with the norms of white civilization.

While this process has been well-documented in many other contexts, what has been less frequently explored is the way that similar racialized and gendered assumptions

were used to extend control over non-English speaking European immigrants who lived and worked within the policies of the colonial state. Lake Winnipeg provides an interesting case in which the rigid dichotomies separating native and European were blurred. As the Icelanders struggled to survive a series of disasters, government officials and public commentators questioned their racial and cultural character in ways similar to those applied to native peoples. However, as the settlers became more firmly established in their new home, they became increasingly enmeshed in the project of colonial rule and committed to notions of racial whiteness.

Chapter 1

Northern Dreamlands: The Convergence of Icelandic Mass Migration and Canadian Expansionism

In May 1873, Department of Agriculture Secretary John Lowe privately sought the advice of Lord Dufferin, Canada's Governor General, on an important question of immigration policy. Lowe had received word from William Dixon, Canada's Chief Emigration Agent in London, that a large migration from Iceland would likely occur that summer. Lowe's basic question to Dufferin was whether it was advisable to direct this migration to Canada. More specifically, he wanted to know "...if the Icelanders were...to come to the Prov. of Quebec, would they be adapted to the country? Or how would they be likely to consort with the Lower Canadians in the matter of religion?"¹ Dufferin was thought to be an authority on these questions as twenty years earlier he had spent a few weeks travelling in Iceland. His rollicking account of the voyage, published in 1857 as *Letters From High Latitudes*, achieved some renown as a work of popular travel literature and was familiar to Lowe and other Canadian civil service mandarins engaged in the business of immigration and colonization. In 1864, Deputy Minister of the Interior Edmund Allen Meredith recorded in his diary that Dufferin's humorous narrative had caused him to laugh out loud in public.² While Dufferin's book did not claim to be a scientific analysis of Iceland's people and society, his preeminent social and political position gave his opinion considerable weight, and made him a logical person to consult on the question of Icelandic immigration. Dufferin replied to Lowe's query, "I

¹ Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Governor General's Office fonds, RG 7 [hereafter RG 7], G20, volume 129, file 3066, Lowe to Colonel Fletcher, 12 May 1873.

² Sandra Gwyn, *The Private Capital: Ambition and Love in the Age of MacDonald and Laurier* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 164.

should say, the Icelanders would make good immigrants. They very much resemble the Norwegians. They are quiet peaceable folk, Lutheran in Religion but not fanatical.”³ With this endorsement Lowe set out to mobilize the financial resources and administrative machinery at his disposal to make Icelandic immigration to Canada a reality. He wrote to Dixon, “...an immigration of Icelanders is much desired in Canada...facilities will be afforded to them to reach the Dominion lands in the North west where free grants of 160 acres would be made to each head of family or adult persons over 21 years of age.”⁴ Two years later, this general offer had evolved into the Icelandic reserve colonization scheme.

* * *

This chapter traces the convergence of Icelandic mass migration and Canadian colonial expansion in the Northwest. It provides some background to the emigration movement in Iceland, which Chapter 3 addresses in more detail. The development of the emigration movement in Iceland coincided with Canada’s adoption of an aggressive new immigrant recruitment campaign focused on northern Europe. Agents of the Allan Steamship Line and the Canadian government stumbled on the burgeoning Icelandic emigration and successfully worked to redirect it from the mid-western United States to Canada. The migration movement in Iceland arose independently of Canadian recruitment efforts, but those efforts were important in facilitating the movement and directing its course. Icelandic migrants were a small component in the colonization of the Northwest, but an exploration of the reasons why they were recruited so aggressively

³ Lord Dufferin to Lowe, 13 May 1873 in LAC, RG 7, G20, volume 129, file 3066, Lowe to Colonel Fletcher, 12 May 1873.

⁴ LAC, Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17 [hereafter RG 17], “General Letterbooks” series [hereafter A I 2], volume 1507, p. 100, Lowe to Dixon, 22 May 1873.

by the Canadian government offers a revealing window into the goals and assumptions that underlay the larger project.

The main question addressed here is how and why Icelandic migration and Canadian colonial expansion became intertwined when, viewed from a distance, such an outcome seems unlikely. In 1966, the historian Norman Macdonald puzzled at a similar question; “What particular obligation was the Dominion government under that it should discriminate between the Icelanders, who were a decided minority of the population and who brought little into the country...” and other immigrants?⁵ What perplexed Macdonald was that the government’s generosity toward the Icelanders seemed at variance with the liberal economic philosophy that underlay government policy during the period—a view of the world stressing individual self-sufficiency and personal initiative and discouraging reliance on government. Canada's immigration policies in the 1870s were a dynamic mixture of material and cultural motivations; economic imperatives coexisted, not always harmoniously, with dreams about the future racial and cultural composition of the Canadian nation.⁶

The assumptions that underlay Canadian immigration policy were often braided together under the concept of “desirability.” Some variation of the phrase “a desirable class of immigrants” frequently appeared in government reports and publications of the period. However, its ubiquity has not been matched by a rigorous interrogation of the meanings that lay behind it, an issue that the first part of this chapter seeks to address.

⁵ Norman P. Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 212.

⁶ See Donald Avery, *"Dangerous Foreigners": European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979); Donald Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995).

The second part of the chapter explores in detail the reasons why the Icelanders were deemed to be desirable immigrants when there was little positive evidence to support their inclusion in that category, and even some that actively contradicted it.

This chapter also recasts a familiar theme in both Canadian and Icelandic historiography—the emergence of colonial nationalism—as the product of related transnational discourses about race and national belonging.⁷ The gradual political transition from colonial dependency to self-governing nation-state in Canada and Iceland between the mid nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries was in both cases underwritten by a set of cultural projects that aimed to define and draw boundaries around an imagined national community. These projects were distinct, but shared a vocabulary drawn from the contemporary efforts of other European countries to fashion national genealogies and definitions of national character. Of particular importance was the idea that the political institutions and social organization of the ancient peoples of northern Europe were the basis for the national and imperial greatness of the western European nations and their colonial offspring. Thomas Jefferson believed that the representative institutions that he and his revolutionary colleagues created in the United States had their origins in the ancient assemblies of the German forests.⁸ The European Romantic movement fascination with the language, culture, and political traditions of the ancient Germanic tribes increased the interest in this idea, and lent support to scientific theories about the racial superiority of the “northern races” variously labeled as Caucasian, Teutonic,

⁷ I am here guided here by Tony Ballantyne’s work on Aryanism. See Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 6.

⁸ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 20-24.

Nordic or Aryan.⁹ This interpretation of history offered both nationalists and imperialists a powerful justification for the legitimacy of their aspirations.

Visions of nation and empire in Iceland and Canada were very much derived from these larger currents. Iceland was a source of endless fascination to the European Romantic movement because of its presumed isolation from the larger currents of world history. Philologists claimed that the Icelandic language was the ancient Norse tongue once common to all Scandinavia. Ethnologists argued that Icelanders were a strand of the ancient “northern races” preserved in an earlier form. Those with an interest in Iceland’s medieval literature imagined contemporary Icelanders as modern equivalents of characters in the medieval sagas. Icelanders helped to create and perpetuate many of these ideas, which became important to Icelandic cultural nationalism. Iceland’s nationalist project focused on a shared language and presumed ethnic and racial homogeneity and aimed for greater domestic control over the island homeland.

In Iceland, the exodus of part of the population could be construed as a threat to the nation’s well being. In English speaking Canada, by contrast, immigration underpinned dreams of imperial destiny.¹⁰ Anglo-Canadian dreamers looked forward to the reunion of the “northern races” in the Canadian Northwest, where they would together build a transcontinental colonial empire destined to become a world power.¹¹ Knowledge of Icelandic racial character, largely derived from travel literature, seemed to presage the Icelanders’ rapid material advancement as colonists, and their fitness as

⁹ See *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁰ See Doug Owram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

¹¹ Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 131.

nation builders in the Canadian Northwest. However, as became obvious when problems arose in the Icelandic reserve, ideas of racial fitness were not stable; positive valuations of racial character could easily be reversed to produce the opposite effect.

The unstable set of meanings associated with race makes the question of its definition problematic. Race is best understood as a historically-constructed category in which real and perceived human differences are invested with meanings that can be mobilized as a basis for, and justification of, social hierarchy and asymmetries of power.¹² The specific articulations of race that this chapter addresses conform to the general picture of nineteenth-century racial thought as an admixture of cultural characteristics, such as language, manners and social organization, and perceived biological or physical difference that over the course of the century became progressively more deterministic. As Christine Bolt has succinctly stated, after 1850, “something called 'race' came to be seen as the prime determinant of all the important traits of body and soul, character and personality, of human beings and nations.”¹³

The relationship between race and nation is similarly a thorny question. In Benedict Anderson’s enduring definition of the nation as an “imagined political community”, race appears only in a supporting role. Anderson argues that racial hierarchy did not originate in nationalist ideology but rather in aristocratic class

¹² My operational definition is derived from the work of both David Roediger and Matthew Frye Jacobson. See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Rev. ed. (London;New York: Verso, 1999), 7. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 10.

¹³ Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 9.

distinctions interpolated into the “official nationalism” of the later nineteenth century.¹⁴ In the context of imperial expansion, the general principle of innate, inherited superiority of the nobility over other levels of society was broadened to conceptualize the relationship between colonizer and colonized; an English merchant might be inferior to an English lord, but both were superior to the native population in any particular corner of the empire.¹⁵ Ann Laura Stoler draws our attention to the ways in which the boundaries of race and other categories of inclusion/exclusion produced in colonial contexts circulated back through the metropole.¹⁶ These exclusions were “not concerned solely with the visual markers of difference, but with the relationship between visible characteristics and invisible properties, outer form and inner essence.”¹⁷ In settler societies such as Canada, the question of inclusion/exclusion was of paramount importance. Government officials strongly believed that immigration was required for economic development, but at the same time immigration was also productive of profound anxieties about the future character of the nation. In essence, this anxiety was about the capacity of non-British immigrants to become liberal subjects, exercising economic and political rights and observing various boundaries of class and gender order and moral propriety.

The hopes and fears about immigration were captured in the concept of “desirability”. In the general parlance of the Department of Agriculture’s Immigration

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London;New York: Verso, 2006), 6-7, 150.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 8, 29-31.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Branch, the extent to which an immigrant fit within the category of “desirable” was an evaluation of their economic worth. Liberal economic theory saw immigration as essential to growth; immigrants brought both capital and labour that could be applied to the development of the Dominion’s vast natural resources; they added to the base of producers and consumers in the total economy and thus were vital in growing national wealth. In 1876 the Bureau of Statistics estimated the per capita value of healthy, productive immigrants to Canada at \$800.¹⁸ Although over time Canada’s immigration policy became more restrictive and included barriers to immigration by Chinese, Japanese, and South Asians, in the first decade after Confederation the door was relatively open. The few formal restrictions that existed were aimed at preventing the entry of people who were considered to be unproductive and dependent—the disabled, the sick, and the indigent poor.¹⁹

Desirable immigrants were those capable of either stepping into vacant low-level niches in the labour market or augmenting it in areas where demand consistently outstripped supply, such as with female domestic servants.²⁰ The 1879 Report of the Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization laid out the main contours of the government’s policy.

No mechanics, artisans or professional men, who had simply their labour to offer, are invited to come to Canada, unless, it may be, for special situations requiring skill in certain areas of manufactures. Tenant farmers from the old

¹⁸ Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 3d sess., 3rd Parliament, 1876, p. 3.

¹⁹ *An Act Respecting Immigration and Immigrants, Statutes of Canada*, 32-33 Victoria c. 10.

²⁰ See Marilyn Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991); Lisa Chilton, *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

countries with sufficient means to purchase lands...are principally invited. Their immigration into Canada will very materially improve their circumstances and add to the wealth of the country. A limited number of female servants will easily find employment and receive much larger compensation for their labour than is offered in European countries.²¹

However, desirability was not simply about occupational criteria or the amount of capital immigrants brought with them to the country. It could also be an aspect of character perceptible through appearance and demeanor. In 1876 J.J. Daley, agent at the Montreal Immigration Office, wrote that in addition to being “possessed of funds to aid them in their future success” the Mennonites and Icelanders passing through his station “bore evident proofs of being a desirable class of immigrants and permanent settlers—they wore an aspect of cheerful, hale, resolute industry....”²² As this statement suggests, subjective assessments of intelligence, moral character and work ethic were important to notions of desirability. The most prized immigrants were those who could contribute the maximum amount of productive and reproductive labour while at the same time being amenable to the assumptions about gender, race, class, and religion that policy makers took for granted as the hallmarks of modern, progressive civilization.

The line between desirable and undesirable immigration was often contested and could shift according to specific contexts and circumstances. In 1879 the British Columbia Member of Parliament Edgar Dewdney testified before the Standing Committee on Chinese Labor and Immigration that the Chinese could be considered

²¹ Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 1st sess., 4th Parliament, 1879, p. 2.

²² “Report of the Montreal Immigration Agent (John J. Daley),” in Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 6, 4th sess. 3rd Parliament, 1877, p. 10.

desirable in some respects, largely because of their high productivity as workers.²³

Another B.C. parliamentarian, Arthur Bunster, argued vociferously for their undesirability, claiming that the presence of the Chinese had “a very bad effect on the moral character of the white children.”²⁴ While never subjected to anywhere near the same level of racist invective as the Chinese in British Columbia, the Icelanders’ status as desirable immigrants in Manitoba was not unassailable. In addition, they found themselves in an ambiguous position relative to the nationalist project of their home country.

In roughly the same period as the British North American colonies transitioned from oligarchic rule to responsible government to autonomous status within the British Empire/Commonwealth as the Dominion of Canada, Iceland underwent a similar transformation in its relationship with the Danish composite monarchy. However, unlike their Canadian counterparts, Icelandic nationalists could draw on a vision of their country’s glorious past as an independent nation during the medieval period to bolster their claims to nationhood. Settled by Norse farmers and their Celtic slaves in the ninth and tenth centuries, Iceland was initially governed by a federation of local chieftaincies who met annually to formulate laws and mete out justice at an assembly called the *Alþingi*. After 1262, Iceland became part of the Norwegian kingdom and later, as a result of some dynastic shuffling, passed under Danish control. A governing partnership between Icelandic elites and the Danish crown continued until the later 1830s, when a few Copenhagen based Icelandic intellectuals influenced by liberal reform movements in

²³ Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 1st sess., 4th Parliament, 1879, p. 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Europe began to demand greater autonomy for Iceland. In 1845, a consultative assembly, named Alþingi after its medieval predecessor, was established, and in 1851 a constituent assembly met for the first time in Reykjavík. The Danish parliament enacted a constitution for Iceland in 1874, giving the Alþingi some legislative powers over internal matters. Home rule was further expanded in 1904, and Iceland became a fully autonomous state in a personal union with the Danish king in 1918. Finally, in 1944 the tie with the Danish monarchy was severed when the Republic of Iceland came into being, albeit in the context of wartime occupation by the United States. While traditional Icelandic historiography has labeled the century-long unwinding of the union with Denmark a “struggle for freedom,” historian Guðmundur Hálfðánarson has argued that it was more of a protracted negotiation about specific terms rather than a dispute over fundamental principles.²⁵ After mid-century most Danish legislators adhered to the nationalist principle that ethnic and state borders should coincide and therefore did not generally dispute the legitimacy of Icelandic claims to national distinctiveness or the political aspirations of Icelandic leaders.²⁶

Between 1870 and 1914, at least 16,408 people left Iceland, a figure that is estimated to represent a twenty percent net population loss.²⁷ During the late 1880s and

²⁵ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, "Severing the Ties: Iceland's Journey From a Union with Denmark to a Nation-State," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 31, no. 3 (2006): 245-46.

²⁶ They did, however, have their doubts about the economic viability of an Icelandic state. The revenues that the state collected did not cover expenditures, so Iceland relied on an annual contribution from the Danish treasury to balance its books. See Gunnar Karlsson, "The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland," in *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World*, ed. Sven Tägil (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 43.

²⁷ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and Steinþór Heiðarsson, *Framtíð handan hafis: Vesturfarir frá Íslandi, 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003), 102-04.

early 1890s, the most intense period of emigration, Icelandic nationalists accused migrants of abandoning the nation. Prominent journalists launched a campaign to discredit Icelandic-Canadian emigration agents, and the Alþingi strengthened the laws that regulated their activities.²⁸ In 1893, Dominion and Manitoba emigration agents were shouted down while attempting to give a public lecture in Reykjavík by a group of government officials, university professors and students, merchants, and “other members of the like class.”²⁹ In the agent’s opinion, their actions did not reflect the attitude of the general population, which remained positively disposed to emigration. In spite of the criticisms directed towards them, many migrants sympathized with the aims of Icelandic political nationalism.

The preservation of Icelandic language and culture from foreign influences was central to Icelandic cultural nationalism, even for those who did not advocate severing ties with Denmark. The eighteenth century Icelandic poet, naturalist and staunch defender of the Danish tie Eggert Ólafsson argued cultural purity and moral stature were fundamentally linked; Icelanders would prosper and the golden age would be revived if foreign influences were abandoned in favour of authentic Icelandic traditions.³⁰ Iceland’s literary heritage was of particular significance in this regard. During the medieval period Icelandic scribes had created compilations of mythic poetry, legal treatises, grammars, documentary histories, and prose sagas about both early Iceland and the kings and heroes of Europe. Some of these manuscripts, and later copies of them, survived and became the

²⁸ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration," in *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe*, ed. P. C. Emmer and Magnus Mörner (New York: Berg, 1992), 107.

²⁹ “Report of Mr. B.L. Baldwinson (Icelandic Agent),” in Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 10, 4th sess., 7th Parliament, 1894, p. 128-129

³⁰ Hálfðánarson, "Severing the Ties," 240.

subject of great interest for European scholars. The Danish philologist Rasmus Christian Rask interpreted the fact that some Icelanders could read these manuscripts without much difficulty as evidence that contemporary Icelandic was the language once common to all of Viking Age Scandinavia.³¹ Although this was an exaggeration, Icelandic nationalists embraced this argument and made it a key component of their understanding of their nation as a homogeneous cultural community whose purity needed to be protected.

The same themes, images, ideas, and texts that were important to Icelandic claims to cultural distinctiveness also made the Icelanders a subject of fascination to outsiders, and in some cases spurred these observers to visit the island in person. This resulted in the production of a relatively large body of travel writing about Iceland by elite British and American visitors during the later nineteenth century.³² In her 1882 travelogue *By Fell and Fjord*, Elizabeth Jane Oswald asserted that the increasing numbers of summer tourists to Iceland were drawn by one of three things—the fishing, the geology, or the old literature. For her it was the literature, “the vivid Sagas which set men and women of the past before us as if we had known them ourselves.”³³ She also noted the special attraction of the language, which gave to old Norse enthusiasts the same thrill that classical scholars would derive from finding “some lonely island...where the Greek of Pericles or the Latin of Augustus was still the common speech.”³⁴ The English Romantic William Morris saw the Icelanders as a people forgotten by time—the authentic relics of

³¹ Karlsson, "The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland," 43.

³² For excerpts from some of the main British works, see Alan Boucher, *The Iceland Traveller: A Hundred Years of Adventure* (Reykjavík: Iceland Review, 1989).

³³ Elizabeth Jane Oswald, *By Fell and Fjord: Or, Scenes and Studies in Iceland* (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood and sons, 1882), 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Europe's medieval past.³⁵

Most British and American travelers arrived in Iceland with the belief that “Anglo-Saxons” shared a genealogical connection with the Icelanders stretching back to the ancient Germanic tribes of northern Europe, but that the isolation had stunted the islanders’ racial development. The *New York Tribune* correspondent Bayard Taylor told the Bishop of Iceland that he and his American countrymen “claimed kinship of the blood” with the Icelanders through the Goths, Saxons, and Normans.³⁶ Taylor viewed Iceland as a living ethnology exhibit; “To meet [the common people of Iceland] was like being suddenly pushed back to the thirteenth century; for all the rich, complex, later developed life of the race has not touched them.”³⁷ Lord Dufferin went much further back into history, interpreting the customs he witnessed in Iceland as evidence supporting theories that posited Asia as the cradle of the northern races. As he watched the caravans of pack-horses wind their way along the rough paths of the Icelandic interior, Dufferin found it easier “...to believe that these remote islanders should be descended from Oriental forefathers.”³⁸

The Icelanders were hardly the only people to be construed as living relics of the past that supported of various theories of racial or linguistic development; such characterizations were common features of western European scholarship and travel writing about non-European people and places, as well as peripheral parts of Europe

³⁵ Anne Brydon, "Inscriptions of Self: The Construction of Icelandic Landscape in Nineteenth Century British Travel Writings," *Ethnos* 60, no. 3 (1995): 248.

³⁶ Bayard Taylor, *Egypt and Iceland in the year 1874* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1875), 204.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 206, 49.

³⁸ Frederick Temple Blackwood Dufferin and Ava, *Letters from High Latitudes: Being Some Account of a Voyage, in 1856, in the Schooner Yacht "Foam," to Iceland, Jan Mayen, & Spitzbergen* (London: John Murray, 1857), 141.

itself. The similarities between travel writing about Iceland and descriptions of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East are indeed striking, and comparisons were sometimes made explicit; Bayard Taylor's 1875 travelogue was titled *Egypt and Iceland in the Year 1874*. Such texts served to legitimize imperial expansion by characterizing foreign peoples as inferior, backwards, or otherwise outside the march of historical progress.³⁹ However, as Mary Louise Pratt has argued, travel accounts were not simply the product of a monolithic dominant culture defining a subordinate periphery; the periphery was integral to the constant refashioning of metropolitan self-image by reinforcing the hierarchies of civilization, nation, culture, and race that explained and legitimized empire.⁴⁰ In many cases, these discourses were co-productions in which subordinate peoples took an active part, incorporating elements of metropolitan discourse into their own self-representations.⁴¹ This was particularly the case in Iceland, where British and American travelers almost invariably had elite Icelanders as their guides, hosts, informants, and interpreters. Thus, to some extent, the image that ended up in travelogues reflected stories that Icelanders told about themselves.⁴² Travelers refracted this knowledge through their own prisms of understanding, incorporating the Icelanders into genealogies of nation and empire that explicated past development and projected future destiny, often in racial terms.

The traveler who perhaps went the furthest in explicitly tying Iceland and its people into the currents of empire was the renowned British linguist, explorer, and

³⁹ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1978).

⁴⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 6-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Brydon, "Inscriptions of Self," 248.

diplomat Sir Richard Francis Burton. Sent to Iceland on a fact finding mission for an English capitalist interested in developing Iceland's sulfur resources, in 1875 Burton published an encyclopedic two-volume account of the trip titled *Ultima Thule or a Summer in Iceland*. Apart from Lord Dufferin's *Letters from High Latitudes*, Burton's book is the only work on Iceland that is known to have been part of the Canadian Immigration Branch's reference library.⁴³ Burton accused previous authors of having "Iceland on the brain" and criticized their hyperbolic descriptions of the landscape as a result of their naivety as travelers.⁴⁴ Burton separated himself from ranks of besotted tourists by projecting the image of a man of science and learning who had seen the wider world and could therefore cast a more discerning gaze on the island and its inhabitants.⁴⁵ His stated purpose was to advocate for the development of the island and its people, whom he believed still possessed the virtues of the ancient Norse, but had become lost to history: "The Icelander cannot be called degenerate. He is what he was. But whilst the world around, or rather beyond him, has progressed with giant strides, he has perforce remained stationary."⁴⁶ Burton considered emigration to be a key method for pulling the Icelanders into modernity: "[Emigration] will be beneficial to the islander, who, instead of dawdling away life at home, will learn to labour and to wait upon a more progressive

⁴³ Edward Jenkins, the Canadian Agent General in London, sent a copy of Burton's book to John Lowe in October 1875. See LAC, RG 17, "General Correspondence" series [hereafter A I 1], volume 145 docket, 15102, Edward Jenkins to Lowe, 28 October 1875.

⁴⁴ Richard Francis Burton, *Ultima Thule; or A Summer in Iceland* (London: Nimmo, 1875), x.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed analysis of Burton's writing on Iceland, see Brydon, "Inscriptions of Self," 243-63.

⁴⁶ Burton, *Ultima Thule*, 144.

race.”⁴⁷ He compared the Icelanders to the Irish and the Basques who, he asserted were seeking a new “racial baptism” by moving to North America. Burton argued that because of their familiarity with toiling in a northern environment, “It might well be worth while for the Dominion [of Canada] to secure a number of these sturdy and strong-brained Northerners, who would form admirable advanced posts along the valley of the Saskatchewan.”⁴⁸

Around the same time as Burton made these statements, Canadians with dreams of building a transcontinental empire were making similar arguments about the role of northern peoples in shaping the character of the nation.⁴⁹ One of the most passionate dreamers was the Montreal lawyer Alexander Morris, who, as Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba and Keewatin during the mid 1870s, played an important role in the history of the Icelandic reserve.⁵⁰ Just as Burton had teased his British countrymen by saying they had “Iceland on the brain”, some of Alexander Morris’s contemporaries alleged that he had “Canada on the brain.”⁵¹ In the latter 1850s Morris was one of a growing number of young Canadian professional men looking to the Hudson’s Bay Company territories as a frontier for colonial expansion. The British and Canadian scientific expeditions led by Captain John Palliser and Professor Henry Youle Hind in 1857-58 helped to overturn the notion of the HBC territory as a barren wilderness, replacing it with a vision of a fertile

⁴⁷ Ibid., xiii-xiv, 208.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁹ Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 5.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 4.

⁵¹ Alexander Morris, *Nova Britannia, or, Our New Canadian Dominion Foreshadowed; Being a Series of Lectures, Speeches and Addresses* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1884), 187.

paradise that would one day be home to millions of agricultural settlers.⁵² Morris's 1858 lecture *Nova Britannia; or, British North America, its extent and future* advocated the incorporation of the Red River settlement into Canada and looked forward to the consolidation of all the colonies into a "British North American Colonial Empire."⁵³ Along with political and economic unification, Morris considered "the right development and formation of national character" to be of paramount importance. That national character was to be based primarily on the values and ideals of nineteenth century liberalism: "A widespread dissemination of a sound education—a steady maintenance of civil and religious liberty, and of freedom of speech and thought, in the possession and enjoyment of all classes of the community—a becoming national respect and reverence for the behests of the Great Ruler of events and his Word...should be the preeminent characteristics of the British American people." He imagined the day when British, French, and others would be fused into one people, "rendered more vigorous by our northern position."⁵⁴

Morris and other believers in Canada's transcontinental destiny argued that the country's geographical position would help shape the character of its people. The biggest perceived drawback of northern North America as a field for European colonization, its climate, was thus presented as the very factor that would guarantee the nation's future greatness. This idea reflected the deterministic shift in the mid-nineteenth century racial thinking, part of which entailed an emphasis on the inherent compatibility or incompatibility of the races of humanity to particular environments. The success of

⁵² Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 72-77.

⁵³ Morris, *Nova Britannia*, 6-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

European imperialism was often explained as a consequence of the northern climate in producing a strong, energetic, and virtuous conquering race.⁵⁵ In using the adjective “northern” to describe the character of the nation they hoped to build, Canada’s imperial dreamers tied their aspirations into wider currents of British imperial thought.

The dreamer who most clearly articulated a vision of the Dominion of Canada as home of a vigorous northern race was Robert Grant Haliburton, an amateur ethnologist and founding member of the imperial-nationalist Canada First movement. His 1869 lecture *Men of the North and Their Place in History* argued that history and geography proved that Canada “must ever be...a Northern country inhabited by the descendants of Northern races.”⁵⁶ The race of the new Dominion would be a syncretic product, just as the British race itself was, an admixture of northern races—the Celtic, Teutonic, and Scandinavian—which were “here again meeting and mingling, and blending together to form a new nationality....”⁵⁷ In a sweeping summation of human history, Haliburton argued that the dead hand of ancient Greek and Roman civilization held the south in despotism and choked off liberty. Echoing the contemporary Anglo-American discourse about the Germanic roots of democratic government, he claimed that modern liberty had been an outgrowth of the vigorous political and legal traditions of the northern peoples.

In Haliburton’s writing, the connection between Iceland and Canada’s destiny is made explicit. He considered the ancient Norsemen to be the most interesting of the

⁵⁵ Mark Harrison, *Climates & Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1600-1850* (Delhi;Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16-18; Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 129.

⁵⁶ R. G. Haliburton, *The Men of the North and Their Place in History: A Lecture Delivered Before the Montreal Literary Club, March 31st, 1869* (Montreal: Lovell, 1869), 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

northern races, and quoted from the Old Norse *Völuspá* (The Seeress's Prophecy), part of an ancient collection of poetry preserved in Icelandic manuscripts.⁵⁸ When the Icelandic immigrants arrived in the Northwest in 1875, they also drew on the *Völuspá*; they named their first village, Gimli, the paradise where the Gods and heroes would happily retire after cataclysmic battle at the end of the world, as a statement of their hopes about their future progress and happiness.⁵⁹ For Haliburton, the ancient prophecy of the "destruction and renovation of the earth" foretold a great future for Canada. In his racialized view of historical progress, the northern races were destined "to sweep away every vestige of a dead past, and build up a new world of life and hope in our race."⁶⁰ Implicit in Haliburton's vision for Canada's future, was that the indigenous and mixed societies of the Red River settlement and the greater Northwest were part of the "dead past" to be swept away. After the Dominion of Canada completed the purchase of the Northwest from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869, it seemed to Canadian expansionists that their dreams of a continent wide empire of their own making would be realized. However, the organized resistance of the Red River Métis and their allies to undemocratic territorial rule in 1869-70 forced the Canadian government into a number of concessions that, at least temporarily, frustrated the ambitions of many Canadian dreamers.

Following the Red River resistance and the creation of Manitoba, immigration became an important focus for R.G. Haliburton's associates in the Canada First movement.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁹ David Arnason, "The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings," in *The New Icelanders: A North American Community*, ed. David Arnason and Vincent Arnason (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994).

⁶⁰ Haliburton, *The Men of the North*, 7.

Through their North-West Emigration Aid Society, they hoped to assist in creating a deluge of immigrants that would shift the region's racial, linguistic, and religious balance against the French and Métis population, and assist in the establishment of British institutions.⁶¹ While they primarily coveted British immigrants, they were also enthusiastic about the immigration of other northern peoples. The principal Canada First agitator at Red River, Dr. John Christian Schultz, expressed a keen interest in Icelandic immigration. In August 1875, Schultz assisted William C. Krieger, the Dominion government's newly minted Icelandic Emigration Agent, during his exploratory tour of Manitoba. Krieger later wrote to Schultz from Akureyri in northern Iceland, promising to forward him a copy of Richard Burton's *Ultima Thule*.⁶²

The Dominion government's emigrant recruitment policies largely reflected the vision of Canada as a nation composed of elements of the northern 'races.' The Immigration Branch's distribution of human and material resources in Europe largely coincided with the countries where the Teutons and Celts of contemporary racial theory resided. Beginning in 1872, the government greatly intensified its recruitment efforts in order to better compete with other potential emigrant destinations, particularly the United States and the British antipodean colonies. An increased number of emigration agents were sent to Great Britain and Ireland, France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries to disseminate propaganda, cultivate connections with local organizations interested in emigration, and supervise a system of commissions designed to give steamship booking agents an incentive to direct "desirable classes" of emigrants

⁶¹ Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 66-67.

⁶² Archives of Manitoba [hereafter AM], Sir John Christian Schultz fonds, MG 12 E1, volume 15, no. 7594-7, W.C. Krieger to J.C. Schultz, 1 November 1875.

to Canada.⁶³ The man sent to establish this system in Scandinavia was William McDougall, whose ambitions of being the first Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Territories had been dashed by Louis Riel and Métis in 1869. In January 1873, McDougall was dispatched to Copenhagen as Canada's "Special Agent for the Scandinavian Kingdoms." Although such appointments were typically patronage plums that yielded few tangible results, McDougall took his mission very seriously. He considered mass migration from Scandinavia to be "one of the most important movements of modern times" and hoped that his exertions would facilitate the movement of "...the vigorous descendants of the "Vikings" and "Danes," who conquered England and Scotland in ancient times, from their original home to the new and "greater Britain in the West...."⁶⁴

Scandinavian immigration and colonization was a cherished dream of Canadian expansionists and policy makers that, with a few exceptions, largely went unfulfilled until the early twentieth century when the waning availability of land in the U.S. west led Scandinavian migrants to move onto the northern prairies of Canada. From the 1850s, thousands of Scandinavian migrants arrived annually at the port of Quebec, but the vast majority simply used Canada as a convenient transport corridor to destinations in the mid-western United States. Canadian officials cast a jealous eye on the success of U.S. railway and colonization companies at attracting immigrants, particularly from Norway, and in the 1850s commenced an active recruitment campaign in Norway that yielded

⁶³ For a more detailed description of this system, see Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization*, 39-46.

⁶⁴ "Report of the Special Mission of Hon. W. McDougall, C.B.," Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 6, 1st sess. 3rd Parliament, 1874, p. 64.

limited success by creating a small colony in Gaspé.⁶⁵ In 1863, the engineer, inventor, and railway surveyor Sanford Fleming made an unsuccessful bid to convince a Norwegian farmer on an exploratory trip to assess potential colony sites in Canada and U.S. west that he should examine Red River, which “would shortly be opened up for Colonization.” Fleming considered the Norwegians to be the ideal colonists for northern North America. He told a friend, “The climate of Norway is so similar to that of the Red River country that people from the former could very easily adapt themselves to the latter than [sic] emigrants from more southern latitudes.”⁶⁶

Ten years later, efforts to recruit Scandinavian immigrants and create colonies in the Northwest were renewed, first by McDougall and then by Colonel Hans Mattson, a Swedish-American immigration promoter, politician, and civil war veteran, who was hired as Dominion Emigration Agent for Scandinavia in September 1873. In spite of McDougall and Mattson’s best efforts to elbow into an already crowded emigrant market with a vigorous propaganda campaign, a system of commissions for agents, and assisted passage for certain groups of preferred emigrants, they ultimately had limited success. Their main obstacle was an established pattern of migration to the United States perpetuated by ties of kin and community and a well articulated informational and transportation network. McDougall and Mattson each attempted to overcome this problem by partnering with individuals to promote various group colonization schemes. The hope was that, once established, they would act as magnets for future immigration. However, McDougall’s efforts to help Norwegian Rev. J.H. Simonsen found a colony in

⁶⁵ Paul W. Gates, "Official Encouragement to Immigration by the Province of Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 15, no. 1 (1934): 31-32.

⁶⁶ LAC, Sir Edward Watkin fonds, MG 24, E17, volume 1, reel A-519, Sanford Fleming to Edward Watkin, 30 July 1863.

Manitoba fell flat, and the success that Mattson had had in establishing Swedish colonies in Minnesota was not repeated during his brief tenure as a Canadian agent.⁶⁷

Although efforts in Scandinavia were a disappointment, they had the unintended consequence of helping bring the burgeoning emigration movement in Iceland to the attention of the Dominion government. It was at precisely this moment that emigration changed from a few young people travelling to Wisconsin in response to favorable reports from Danish and Norwegian friends and relatives, to an organized mass movement of whole families. To this point only one of the young Icelandic migrants, Sigtryggur Jónasson, had settled in Canada. Although there were no examples of successful Icelandic colonies in North America, the Icelanders were lumped in with the Scandinavians and classed as “desirable immigrants”. Much of this is encapsulated in Lord Dufferin’s May 1873 quip to John Lowe about the physical and cultural resemblance between Icelanders and Norwegians.⁶⁸ Others reinforced Dufferin’s assessment; in noting the “great agitation among people of all classes on the subject of emigration” in Iceland, Hans Mattson commented, “[The Icelanders] are a hardy, frugal, and industrious race—the oldest type of Scandinavian—they are well inured to a northerly climate, are excellent herdsmen and fishermen and I believe that the eastern coast of Canada would be well adapted for their future home...”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ For a more in depth analysis of Canada’s campaign and the work of McDougall and Mattson, see, Lars Ljungmark, "Canada's Campaign for Scandinavian Immigration, 1873-1876," *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1982): 21-42.

⁶⁸ Lord Dufferin to Lowe, 13 May 1873 in LAC, RG 7, G 20, volume 129, file 3066, Lowe to Colonel Fletcher, 12 May 1873.

⁶⁹ “Annual Report of H. Mattson, Special Immigration Agent in Scandinavia, 18 December 1874,” in Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 8, 2nd sess., 3rd Parliament, pp. 134-135.

Beginning in the spring of 1873, the Dominion government extended the same assisted transportation incentives to the Icelanders that were applied to agricultural labourers and domestic servants from Britain and continental Europe.⁷⁰ That summer, agents of the Dominion and Ontario governments, working hand-in-glove with the Scottish-Canadian Allan Steamship Line, arranged for the subsidized transport of a group of 153 Icelanders to Quebec *via* Scotland, the first large group migration from the island. The Ontario government settled approximately 115 of these people at Rosseau in the Muskoka district, an area then being promoted as a settlement frontier. This experiment was repeated on a larger scale in 1874, when a group of 351 Icelanders were settled at Kinmount in Victoria County; Ontario immigration authorities arranged for the Icelanders to work as labourers on the line of the Victoria railway being constructed to the Ottawa River, but by early 1875 the promised employment dried up, and the Icelanders required assistance from the provincial government for basic survival.⁷¹ Baptist missionary John Taylor's overtures to the Dominion government on the Icelanders' behalf led to the creation of the Icelandic reserve, and the removal of the majority of the 1873-74 migrants to the Northwest in the fall of 1875.

The failure of the Kinmount experiment resulted in a fierce critique of the Icelandic character from Ontario's Immigration Commissioner Adam Crooks that tarnished the Icelanders' image as desirable immigrants. Crooks alleged that the Icelanders lacked the individual initiative to become independent settlers. He construed

⁷⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 2, volume 1507, p. 100, Lowe to Dixon, 22 May 1873.

⁷¹ The first migrations to Canada and the Ontario colonization schemes are detailed in Ryan C. Eyford, "Icelandic Migration to Canada, 1872-1875: New Perspectives on the 'Myth of Beginnings'" (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2003), 46-117.

their poverty and dependence on the “paternal care” of the government as a sign that they were lacking the spirit of liberal individualism; “each individual must... depend on his own exertion for his livelihood and success.” Crooks somewhat disingenuously claimed that his government was not responsible for introducing “such a class of emigrants [sic] into Ontario”, placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Dominion authorities.⁷² After being informed that the Ontario government would no longer accept Icelandic immigrants, Edward Jenkins, the Canadian Agent General London, argued against the Dominion government making any move to adopt the same policy; the Ontario episode did not overturn “all the information we have of that people” which generally indicated that they would in time become “a very valuable class of settlers.”

It is hardly to be expected that a people whose character, habits and modes of life are so wholly different from our own, should at once adapt themselves to the very great change to which their emigration to the colony subjects them, and as the question of Icelandic emigration has been well considered, and favourable results were expected to arise from it, it hardly seems politic to abandon it in its very first stage.⁷³

Immigration officials in Ottawa generally shared this view; they tended to see the Icelanders’ difficulties as temporary setbacks rather than chronic incapacities, and were still firmly committed to promoting Icelandic immigration. In September 1875 the Privy Council approved the unusual step of paying for the removal of the Icelanders from Ontario to the Northwest. Since this was a break with established policy—assistance was not usually given to facilitate migration from one part of Canada to another—the government felt the need to justify its actions; “continued suffering would seriously

⁷² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 126, docket 13297, Adam Crooks to Lowe, 30 January 1875.

⁷³ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 128, docket 13443, Edward Jenkins to the Minister of Agriculture, 18 February 1875.

check immigration and render negatory [sic] the efforts now being made to attract as settlers to Canada a considerable portion of the inhabitants of Iceland, a very large part of which has been rendered uninhabitable by recent volcanic eruptions.”⁷⁴

The eruption of the volcano Askja on Easter Monday 1875 raised the possibility that the relatively small emigration from Iceland would become a general exodus of a substantial portion of the population. Reports of damage to pasture and hay fields in the north and east of the island were reported widely in Britain and North America.⁷⁵ The disaster received considerable attention in London, due largely to the efforts of the Cambridge professor Eiríkur Magnússon. He wrote to the *Times* of London that the eruption’s “inevitable consequence will be famine and destruction on a large scale unless timely aid should be forthcoming.”⁷⁶ In response to Magnússon’s appeal, the Lord Mayor of London formed a committee to raise £1,000 in charitable donations for a shipload of relief supplies.⁷⁷ One *Times* correspondent thought the funds could be put to better use as an aid to emigration; “Immigrants are sorely needed in our more sparsely-peopled North American dependencies, where the thrifty and industrious islanders would make the very best of settlers.”⁷⁸

The Dominion government was well aware of the opportunity presented by the crisis, and, as a result, accelerated its recruitment efforts in Iceland. William C. Krieger,

⁷⁴ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, reel C-3313, volume 337, Order in Council PC 1875-0889, 13 September 1875.

⁷⁵ Including in Winnipeg, where Sigtryggur Jónasson, then in Manitoba as part of the Icelandic Deputation, translated a piece on the eruption from the Icelandic newspaper *Norðanfari* that was published in the *Free Press*. See *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 10 August 1875.

⁷⁶ *Times* [London], 1 July 1875.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 August 1875.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 14 August 1875.

a Danish-American librarian who had previously worked in the Chicago offices of the Allan Line, offered his services as an emigration agent and was quickly hired by the Department of Agriculture.⁷⁹ John Lowe instructed Krieger to “induce such Icelandic emigrants to come to Canada as will have sufficient means after arrival to form a self-supporting colony.”⁸⁰ Although Krieger found that reports of the devastation wrought by the volcanic eruption had been “most unconscientiously exaggerated,” he nonetheless encountered considerable interest in emigration, particularly in the north of Iceland.⁸¹ In September 1875 Sigtryggur Jónasson, the first Icelander to settle in Canada, was appointed as a second agent for Iceland. Jónasson was authorized to have 15,000 copies of the deputation’s report printed for distribution in Iceland.⁸² In London, the report was published as a pamphlet titled *Nýa [sic] Ísland í Kanada* with a somewhat patronizing introduction from the Agent General Jenkins providing general information about Canada, outlining its relative advantages over the United States, and detailing the offer of assisted passage and free homesteads in New Iceland, the “splendid gift of the Canadian government.” Jenkins warned that colonization was not an easy business; there would be hardships and difficulties, “But a strong and resolute man need fear nothing. The weak and thriftless and idle had better stay at home.”⁸³

⁷⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 136, docket 14235, W.C. Krieger to Luc Letellier de St. Just, 24 June 1875.

⁸⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 2, volume 1511, p. 263, Lowe to W.C. Krieger, 10 July 1875.

⁸¹ “Report of the Icelandic Immigration Agent (W.C. Krieger),” in Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 7, 3rd sess., 3rd Parliament, 1876, pp. 175-176.

⁸² LAC, RG 17, A I 2, volume 1513, p. 1-3, Lowe to Jónasson, 15 September 1875.

⁸³ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 145, docket 15119, Edward Jenkins to the Minister of Agriculture, 29 October 1875. For the complete pamphlet, see Canada and Department of Agriculture, *Nýa Ísland í Kanada* (Ottawa; London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1875).

During the winter of 1875-76 Krieger, Jónasson, and their sub-agents overcame a number of daunting logistical and financial hurdles to organize an emigration of two parties totaling 1,143 people, who arrived in Quebec in July 1876.⁸⁴ Jónasson reported that the emigrants were farmers, farm labourers, and fishermen, primarily of middle-aged men and their families, but there were also a significant number of single men and women.⁸⁵ Except for a small number who went to join friends and relatives in Nova Scotia, the vast majority of these two groups travelled to the Icelandic reserve. During the journey some were unwittingly exposed to the smallpox virus, the beginnings of the epidemic that crippled the colony for almost a year and reduced its inhabitants to pariah status in Manitoba.

The troubles and failures of the Icelandic reserve during its first two years again brought the moral and racial character of the Icelanders into question. Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris commissioned Dr. James Spencer Lynch, formerly Chief Medical Officer at Gimli during the smallpox epidemic, to write a detailed report on the colony and its future prospects.⁸⁶ Prior to the transfer of the Northwest, Lynch had been a member of the Canadian annexationist party at Red River, and was a close associate of John Christian Schultz. In December 1869, he was imprisoned along with Schultz and other Canadian agitators by Louis Riel's provisional government. By the mid-1870s, Lynch was working as the attending physician at the Winnipeg Immigration sheds, where

⁸⁴ LAC, RG 17, A III 1, volume 2395, Reports on Arrivals at Quebec, 1876.

⁸⁵ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 162, docket 16850, Jónasson to the Minister of Agriculture, 7 July 1876.

⁸⁶ Dr. J.S. Lynch to Alexander Morris, 17 April 1877 in LAC, Department of the Secretary of State fonds, RG 6 [hereafter RG 6], A 1, volume 28 file 536, "Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba - Transmits report by Dr. S.S. [sic] Lynch on condition of the Icelandic settlement on Lake Winnipeg, 1877."

he treated the many cases of fever and dysentery among the Icelanders who arrived at Winnipeg in August 1876. On that occasion Lynch observed that the Icelanders “are peculiar in their inaptitude for acclimatization here” and noted, “In spite of their fresh complexions and apparent sturdiness there is constitutionally a great want of vitality.”⁸⁷ After spending the winter of 1876-77 in the Icelandic reserve, Lynch was even less charitable; his report to Morris was a scathing critique of the colonists that highlighted their moral and physical weakness. Lynch ascribed the problems that he observed on the reserve—cramped and insufficient housing, poor sanitation, an inadequate diet, slow progress in agriculture and fisheries, endemic and epidemic disease—to the Icelanders’ “listless, dejected, apathetic natures.” He saw their lack of material progress as a function of “their natural indolence, and a child-like faith in the providence of Government.”⁸⁸

The arrival of Lynch’s report in Ottawa only exacerbated the lingering doubts about the future of Icelandic immigration and colonization. In February 1877, William Krieger was summarily dropped as Icelandic Emigration agent, for the reason that it was unwise to “make further propagandisation [sic]...in view of the present condition of the Icelandic Colony in Keewatin.”⁸⁹ After digesting the contents of Lynch’s report, John Lowe wrote an exasperated private letter to Icelandic Agent John Taylor at Gimli; “The Government have been informed that the Icelanders don't work, that they have not the habits of thrift and industry, that they are not agriculturalists, and that they have even neglected to catch

⁸⁷ Dr. J.S. Lynch to William Hespeler, 30 October 1876 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 172, docket 17824, Hespeler to Lowe, 9 November 1876.

⁸⁸ Dr. J.S. Lynch to Alexander Morris, 17 April 1877 in LAC, RG 6, A 1, volume 28 file 536.

⁸⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 2, reel T-117, volume 1518, p. 12, Lowe to Krieger, 26 February 1877.

fish at their own doors.”⁹⁰ Lowe followed Lynch’s suggestion and threatened Taylor that all government support for the colony would be cut off in order to encourage a “self reliant spirit” among the colonists.

Dr. Lynch’s report reveals that the same notions about the Icelanders as a people apart, a living fragment of the history and culture of the northern ‘races,’ that were used to portray the Icelanders as desirable settlers for the Canadian Northwest, could be turned around to marginalize them as degenerates, incapable of adjusting to colonial modernity. Lynch claimed that “Centuries of isolation and intermarriage have had the effect of reducing their physical condition to a point below which they are likely to be successful in the rude contest with western pioneers, yet that contest is inevitable, and to the hardy settler should prove beneficial.” He also blamed their condition on the absence of war from recent Icelandic history, which “...had the effect of suppressing or obliterating whatever they possessed of ambition at an earlier period in their history.”⁹¹ The only bright spot in what Lynch conceded was a rather dark picture was another trope of Icelandic national character—the “love of letters which seems to be innate to [the Icelander’s] character.” Lynch speculated that this educational impulse would likely lead to their quick absorption into the developing commercial towns of the prairie west, a statement which was not necessarily meant as a compliment.⁹² Lynch’s pessimistic assessment of the Icelanders must have circulated widely in Winnipeg; the *Free Press* reported that from the reports circulating in the city, many people had the impression that

⁹⁰ LAC, RG 17, “Semi-Official Letterbooks” series [hereafter A I 6], reel T-132, volume 1633, p. 217, Lowe to Taylor, 2 May 1877.

⁹¹ Dr. J.S. Lynch to Alexander Morris, 17 April 1877 in LAC, RG 6, A 1, volume 28, file 536.

⁹² *Ibid.*

the Icelanders were "...an effete and unprogressive race, who were not equal to the struggle of life on this continent and must inevitably succumb to the fate of the 'least fit.'"⁹³

However, Lynch's negative characterization of the Icelanders did not hold; while Icelandic backwardness was considered a fact, others argued that there was hope for its reversal, and for the regeneration of the Icelandic race to Canada's benefit. Chief among them was Governor General Lord Dufferin, the one-time Iceland traveler. On his official visit to Gimli in September 1877, Dufferin told the assembled colonists that he had "...pledged my personal credit to my Canadian friends on the successful development of your settlement" and that he had no doubt that their future would be happy and prosperous.⁹⁴ Dufferin conceded that long-term isolation had largely left the "men and women of the grand old Norse race" outside the main currents of European civilization, but believed that their intelligence and education would be the foundation of their racial renewal in the Canadian Northwest. He compared the Icelanders to a seed found under an Egyptian pyramid, which needed only to be placed in fertile earth to burst into life. "Beneath the genial influences of the fresh young world to which you have come, the dormant capacities of your race, which adverse climatic and geographical conditions may have somewhat stunted and benumbed, will bud and burgeon forth in all their pristine exuberance..."⁹⁵ Dufferin admonished the Icelanders that even while "becoming Englishmen", they should not forget the ancient sagas of their nation that told of the

⁹³ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 25 September 1877.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17 September 1877.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

“...industry, energy, fortitude, perseverance, and stubborn endurance that have ever been characteristics of the noble Icelandic race.”⁹⁶

Dufferin’s strong endorsement of the Icelanders was widely reproduced in the press, and gave the government a renewed faith in the project. This was reinforced when the Ministers of Agriculture and Interior and their top administrators, including John Lowe, made their own visit to the colony a few weeks later. Lowe's account of this trip, published anonymously in the *Globe*, defended the government's support for the project, and speculated on the destiny of the Icelanders in Canada.

Perhaps these Icelanders may make their mark in the history and on the face of this continent as men of their blood did in Europe. I don't mean in quite the same way, but with the means at their disposal. They are evidently a most prolific race. Every house swarms with children, and the pleasures of hope are plainly as great as those of memory.⁹⁷

In this statement Lowe brought together the ancient Norse past and the future of Canada. The supposedly remarkable fecundity of "the noble Icelandic race" would help transform the Northwest. This renewed faith in the Icelanders as colonists translated into the resumption of active emigrant recruitment in Iceland. John Lowe wrote to James Ennis of the Allan Line, that Icelandic immigration was looking “up in the market; it did look very blue a few months ago but now it would be among the most favoured Immigrations...I am very much inclined to believe that Iceland will in the immediate future be one of your best fields from which to obtain immigrants.”⁹⁸ William Krieger was rehired for one final trip to Iceland, and Sigtryggur Jónasson was commissioned to produce a special

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *The Globe*, 2 October 1877.

⁹⁸ LAC, RG 17, “English and Continental Letterbooks” series [hereafter A I 8], volume 1666, p. 124 reel T-158, Lowe to James Ennis, 19 October 1877.

edition of the Icelandic reserve's newspaper *Framfari* to be distributed to intending emigrants.⁹⁹ Jónasson was also sent to Quebec in the summers of 1878 and 1879 to meet arriving Icelanders and guide them to the Northwest.¹⁰⁰ In 1883, Jónasson's cousin Baldwin L. Baldwinson took over this function, and was later appointed Dominion Icelandic Agent. Baldwinson held this position until 1896, which entailed travelling to Iceland to recruit emigrants, escorting them from Quebec to Winnipeg, helping them to settle in the Northwest, and reporting on conditions in the various Icelandic settlements.¹⁰¹

John Lowe's 1877 prediction that Icelandic mass migration would become an important movement was borne out over the next several decades. Between 1873 and 1914, at least 13,958 Icelanders came to Canada, which represented approximately 85 per cent of the entire migration from Iceland during the period.¹⁰² The vast majority of these immigrants travelled to the Canadian Northwest. In his 1901 address to the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Sigtryggur Jónasson estimated the number of Icelanders in Manitoba alone at 9,900. The most populous among the rural settlements

⁹⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 2, reel T-117, volume 1520, p. 210, Lowe to Krieger, 27 February 1878 and reel T-117, volume 1520, p. 273, Lowe to Taylor, 1 April 1878. For the special edition, see *Framfari*, 22 March 1879.

¹⁰⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 232 docket 23807, Jónasson to Lowe, 3 September 1878; LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 255, docket 26247, Jónasson to Lowe, 29 July 1879.

¹⁰¹ See LAC, Department of Immigration fonds, RG 76 [hereafter RG 76], I-A-1, reels C-4679 and C-4680, volume 22, file 389, parts 1 & 2, Baldwin L. Baldwinson, Icelandic Agent, 1892-1900.

¹⁰² Based on the reports of the Quebec Immigration Agent and the Icelandic Agents, contained in the Canadian *Sessional Papers* and William Duncan Scott, "Immigration and Population," in *Canada and its Provinces: A History of the Canadian People and their Institutions by One Hundred Associates. Volume 7, section IV: The Dominion Political Evolution, part II* ed. Adam Shortt and Arthur G Doughty (Toronto: Glasgow, Brook & Company, 1914), 526-27.

was New Iceland, which, Jónasson wrote, “in spite of several misfortunes in its early days, now contains some 2,500 prosperous people.”¹⁰³ Among those to offer their commendation to Jónasson for his paper, and his “appreciation of the Icelanders as settlers” was the poet Charles Mair, who had been a member of the Canadian party that agitated for the annexation of the Northwest and a leading proponent of the dream of Canada as a nation peopled by the northern races.

By the time of Jónasson’s address, the Icelanders’ success as western colonists had firmly entrenched them among the ranks of the most desired immigrants to Canada. The doubts that their early difficulties had cast on their racial and cultural fitness were largely forgotten. However, the septuagenarian Irish-Catholic senator, Richard William Scott, did remember. He believed that the Icelanders’ story contained a lesson about toleration and patience toward newcomers. As Secretary of State and frequent acting Minister of Agriculture and Interior in the administration of Alexander Mackenzie, Scott had played an important role in the creation of the Icelandic reserve and in the initial efforts to promote Icelandic immigration. In 1901 he used the Icelandic example to counter attacks against another group of recently arrived immigrants—the Doukhobors—by some of his colleagues. Scott pointed out that although the Icelanders had been extremely poor and required considerable government assistance, in the space of one generation they had become “a very valuable class of population” in Manitoba: “So it will be with the Doukhobors. This prejudice will all pass away, and long before twenty-

¹⁰³ Sigtryggur Jónasson, *The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press, 1901), 15.

five years. I hope my Hon. friend from Monck will live to see it, and to admit that his statements about the Doukhobors are unjust.”¹⁰⁴

Canadian praise for the Icelanders in the first two decades of the twentieth century recapitulated the older themes about the characteristics of the northern race, and combined them with anecdotal observations about the rapidity of Icelandic assimilation. J.S. Woodsworth’s 1909 treatise on Canadian immigration *Strangers Within Our Gates* again made the link between Norse medieval and contemporary colonization, “...it was the bold navigators of the isolated island who first set foot on the continent of America...It is the descendants of these Viking sea-rovers who are making their way in the Canadian West, and who are becoming in their adopted land a potent influence.”¹⁰⁵ Dominion Superintendent of Immigration William Duncan Scott’s 1913 accounting of “Immigration by Races” asserted that in their ability to learn English, the Icelanders were 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 foreign accent by the time the harvest is being garnered in the fall.”¹⁰⁶ However, facility in English was no guarantee of being classed as a “desirable settler”; notions of whiteness, with their connotations of environmental suitability and inherent superiority, were too important to the boundaries placed around Canada’s nation-building project. In the section prior to his description of the Icelanders, W.D. Scott wrote of African Americans that although their communities included many fine citizens, “It is to be hoped

¹⁰⁴ Canada, Parliament, *Debates of the Senate of the Dominion of Canada*, 1901, p. 171-172.

¹⁰⁵ J. S. Woodsworth, *Strangers Within Our Gates, or Coming Canadians* (Toronto: Frederick Clarke Stephenson, 1909), 92-97.

¹⁰⁶ Scott, "Immigration and Population," 532.

that climatic conditions will prove unsatisfactory to [them], and that the fertile lands of the West will be left to be cultivated by the white race only.”¹⁰⁷

* * *

The answer that historian Norman Macdonald devised for his question about what “particular obligation” had led the Canadian government to expend such a disproportionate amount of resources on Icelandic immigration only captured part of the story. Macdonald argued that in their rush to attract mere numbers of settlers to the Northwest, government officials did not consider whether the Icelanders had the material resources to become independent farmers virtually overnight. When those hopes proved to be overly optimistic it became necessary to intervene in order to prevent starvation.¹⁰⁸ While Macdonald’s analysis correctly identified fundamental problems in the planning of the Icelandic reserve and their attendant consequences, the answer to his question is more complex. The fact that there were Icelanders living on the shores of Lake Winnipeg who needed to be rescued from starvation was just as much a symptom of the government’s “particular obligation” as its cause. Icelanders were recruited as immigrants to Canada because they fit a set of cultural understandings about the relationship between ‘race,’ class and nation building. The government desperately needed immigrant labour to fulfill the dreams of transcontinental empire that had been entertained by Canadian expansionists since the 1850s. Those dreams also entailed a racial order in which the “hardy northern races” would predominate in the new territories. Because they were believed to be the close racial kin of Britons, the Icelanders fit neatly into the dreams of Anglo-Canadian expansionists who hoped to build an empire in the Northwest. Icelandic

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 531.

¹⁰⁸ Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization*, 212.

immigrants were considered “desirable” and received substantial support from the state because they promised to fulfill both the material and cultural goals that undergirded the larger nation-building project.

Chapter 2

Broken Townships: New Iceland, Colonization Reserves and The Dominion Lands System

In July 1875, Baptist missionary John Taylor, Sigtryggur Jónasson and four other young Icelanders arrived at the Winnipeg office of Dominion Lands Agent Donald Codd. They presented Codd with a letter of introduction from the Surveyor General in Ottawa, explaining that the Departments of Agriculture and Interior had sponsored their journey to Manitoba to locate a suitable site for an Icelandic colony. Codd showed the delegation maps of the province, pointing out the lands available for settlement as well as those that had already been claimed or reserved for some other purpose.¹ It soon became apparent to the delegates that their options for a colony site in Manitoba were somewhat limited (See figure 2.1). The fertile lands along the Red and Assiniboine rivers to the north, south, and west were home to the long established parishes of the Red River settlement. The northernmost parish, St. Peter's, was also an Indian reserve—one of several created under recently negotiated treaties. The townships immediately beyond the old parishes were the Half-breed reserves—lands intended to fulfill the Dominion government's obligation under the Manitoba Act to distribute 1.4 million acres of land to the children of Métis families. In the adjacent surveyed townships were numerous settlements of Anglo-Canadians, primarily from Ontario. There were also tracts reserved for other special group colonization projects; to the south and southeast of Winnipeg were reserves for French Canadians and Mennonites. To the north was a reserve for Germans, and further to the west another for Danes. Finally, and overlapping with many of the other types of

¹ “Report of the Icelandic Deputation,” included in Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17 [hereafter RG 17], “General Correspondence” series [hereafter A I 1], volume 140, docket 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

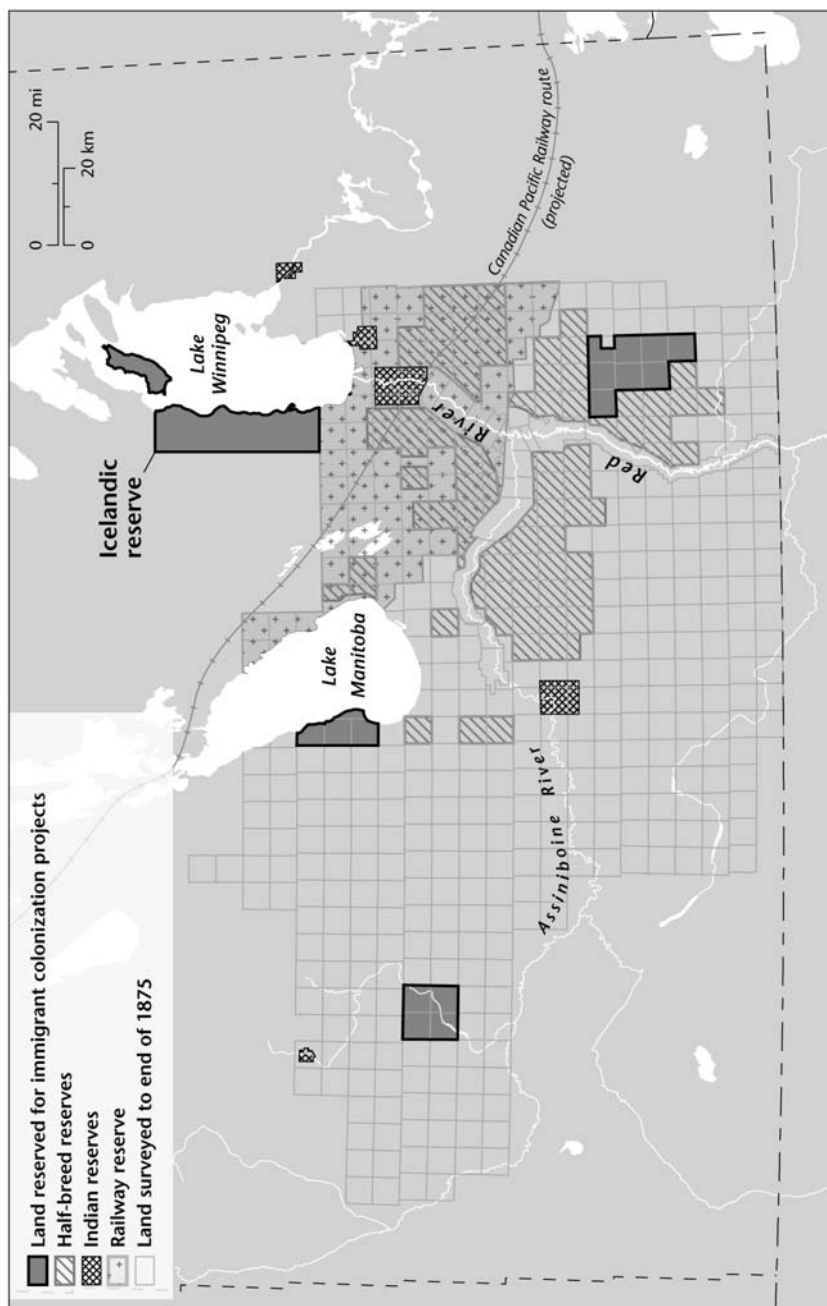


Figure 2.1. Reserves and Surveyed Land in Manitoba, 1875 (Map by Eric Leinberger, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia). *Source*: James M. Richtik, "Manitoba Settlement, 1870 to 1886" (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971), 157.

reserves and settlements, was the railway reserve—all the land twenty-five miles on either side of the proposed route of the Canadian Pacific Railway was unavailable for homesteaders. There was still a considerable amount of surveyed land on the open prairie in the western part of the province, but settlement in that area was still generally unpopular, even with Canadian settlers, due to the lack of timber for building and fuel.²

The delegation came to the conclusion that there was “no land in the province... suitable and attractive to the Icelanders.”³ They followed Codd’s recommendation to visit the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg, an area in the North-West Territories just north of the provincial boundary. The Hudson’s Bay Company provided them with a boat, supplies and two Métis navigators. Joseph Monkman, a leading member of the English-speaking mixed-blood community in St. Peter’s parish, acted as their guide. At Selkirk, Dominion Land Surveyor A.H. Vaughn shared the insights that he had gained while conducting a coastal survey of the area two years earlier. After a week’s exploration the Icelandic deputation returned to Winnipeg. They wrote to the Department of the Interior asking that the lands along the lakeshore from the mouth of the Red River to Grindstone Point be set aside as a reserve for Icelandic immigrants.⁴ They also informed Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris of the choice, and asked him

² On colonization in Manitoba before 1880 see chapters 7 and 8 of W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957). For a more comprehensive survey of land policy and administration in the same period, see chapters 3 and 4 of James Morton Richtik, “Manitoba Settlement, 1870 to 1886” (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971).

³ “Report of the Icelandic Deputation,” included in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

⁴ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140 dockets 14644 and 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 11 and 31 August 1875; *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 8 and 11 August 1875; Archives of Manitoba [hereafter AM], GR 1601, Surveyor’s Field Book No. 336.

to give their claim priority over a group of Cree from Norway House who wanted a reserve in the same location.⁵ Just over a month later, as Morris was preparing to travel north to negotiate a treaty with the Lake Winnipeg Indians, he received definite instructions on the matter from the Minister of the Interior David Laird: “In dealing with Norway House Indians, [you] must not promise them [a] reserve at Grassy Narrows, as Icelanders propose settling there.”⁶ An Order-in-Council of 8 October 1875 formally established the west shore of Lake Winnipeg as an exclusive Icelandic colonization reserve, the latest block of land to be outlined on Donald Codd’s map of Manitoba and the North-West Territories.⁷

* * *

This chapter situates the Icelandic reserve within the framework of Dominion Lands policy. It also examines the origins of land reservation and group settlement in the history of British colonialism, and how the Canadian state used these practices to further the colonization of the Northwest from 1870 to the early twentieth-century. Land reservation and group settlement were spatial practices that reflected and helped enforce colonial categories of difference.⁸ Reserves of various types were geographic expressions of legal and cultural distinctions that the colonial state made subjects based on race and ethnicity. They inscribed those distinctions onto the uniform survey grid,

⁵ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor’s Collection, Correspondence, no. 1066, The Icelandic Deputation to Morris, 3 August 1875.

⁶ LAC, David Laird fonds, MG 27, 1D10, Laird to Morris, 15 September 1875.

⁷ LAC, Privy Council Office fonds, RG 2 [hereafter RG 2], “Orders-in Council” series [hereafter A 1 a], PC 1875-0987.

⁸ The perspective on space here is derived from Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Kate Brown, “Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (2001): 17-48.

separating those who were deemed to be ready to assume full civil and political rights of liberal citizenship from those in need of further tutelage and supervision. Government officials considered reserves to be reformatories where subordinate populations could be prepared for the new order.⁹ European immigrants such as the Icelanders occupied a position in this social taxonomy between white British subjects and Aboriginal people, who were treated as wards of the state and subjected to an invasive regime of surveillance and supervision. However, the role of formal state power in articulating this colonial hierarchy should not be overestimated. In the Canadian Northwest during the 1870s and 1880s, the state had a relatively light footprint and the formal application of coercive power was uneven. What's more, a belief in the promise of liberal institutions and practices to transform society for the better was not a state monopoly. Demands for liberal reform could come from the margin, and opposition could emanate from the centre.

The spatial practices of land reservation and group settlement generated tensions between individual and collective rights, integration and segregation, inclusion and exclusion. The analysis here explores these tensions and ambiguities by addressing four key queries, two relating to land reservation and group settlement in general, and two focusing on the Icelandic reserve in particular. First, where did these practices come from and what was their purpose? Second, how did they fit within the broader framework for the alienation of lands in the Northwest set out under the Dominion Lands Act? Finally, how, if at all did reserve status affect the types of spatial practices used within the reserve?

⁹ Rod Bantjes, *Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 32.

In the early years of the Icelandic reserve, the Dominion government's failure to create the conditions necessary for private property relations was a source of continual frustration to the settlers. The official survey of the reserve was for a long time incomplete, and the land registration process was irregular and unofficial. It was the distance between the promise of acquiring landed property held out in the Dominion Lands Act and the reality of the reserve situation that led many Icelanders to demand they be treated the same as non-reserve settlers, and even led some colonists to assert that it was the reserve itself that was the problem.¹⁰ Yet, the reserve persisted until 1897, and the colonists sometimes used its unique status to secure advantageous concessions from the Dominion Lands administration. The centralized state's blueprint for a liberal order took on a new solidity as the immigrants internalized its assumptions, enforced its boundaries, and pushed at its limits.

The overarching purpose of the Dominion government in reserving tracts of land for particular individuals, corporate or collective interests, was to encourage private capital to help finance immigration and colonization. In this broad sense, reserves were a continuation of a practice that had deep roots in the history of British colonialism. Beginning in the early seventeenth-century, the British crown made large land grants in North America to favoured elites, either individually or collectively as chartered companies. Recipients of these proprietary grants often aimed to generate income through plantation agriculture, rents, and later, land sales. These grants were large and imprecise, and the proprietors were given considerable autonomy in the exercise of local colonial government. This led to the development of a diverse array of land allocation

¹⁰ See the Rev. Jón Bjarnason's article "The Most Pressing Need" in *Framfari*, 16 July 1878, p. 298-301.

practices and types of land tenure in the various American colonies.¹¹ The practice of elite land grants continued through the eighteenth-century, and was central to land allocation in the Canadas in the decades after the American Revolution. Over time local administration became more regularized; land was distributed in clearly defined parcels and granted under certain conditions, usually involving settlement promotion. These conditions frequently were neglected as grantees held onto their unimproved lands as a speculative asset.¹² Still, many recipients of land grants sought to increase the value of their holdings by actively developing them.

Group migration and settlement, organized under wholly private auspices or with some level of state support, was an important method for promoting colonization in British North America. For their sponsors, these schemes often combined a speculative interest in land with humanitarian, ideological or strategic motivations. The migrants recruited for these projects often came from the same home region in Britain, Ireland, or continental Europe and were connected with one another through family and kinship networks and by shared ties of language, religion, and culture. Lord Mount Cashel's holdings on Amherst Island in Upper Canada were intended to be an estate that replicated the landlord-tenant relationship among his Protestant Irish colonists.¹³ The elite sponsored group settlement schemes of the early nineteenth century also included philanthropic efforts to assist people adversely affected by structural changes in the economy of their home region. Lord Selkirk's colonies for dispossessed Scottish

¹¹ John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 178-81.

¹² *Ibid.*, 202-04.

¹³ Catharine Anne Wilson, *A New Lease on Life: Landlords, Tenants and Immigrants in Ireland and Canada* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 5.

Highlanders in Prince Edward Island, Upper Canada, and Red River were shaped by an anti-modern and paternalistic sensibility that aimed to reconstitute relations of production and social hierarchy that were in the process of disintegrating in the home country.¹⁴

Group settlement schemes sponsored directly by the state blended humanitarian and strategic motives; between 1750 and 1752 approximately 2,000 German speakers from the Rhineland, purported to be the victims of religious persecution, received assistance from the imperial government to migrate to Nova Scotia. The purpose was to use these “foreign Protestants” to bolster British claims to the colony.¹⁵

During the 1830s and 40s colonial theorist Edward Gibbon Wakefield developed the highly influential concept of “systematic colonization.” Wakefield argued that the state and private capital should work in tandem to promote the group migration of suitable settlers to compact colonies on designated tracts of land. He believed that colonization was the key to solving the demographic and economic problems of both Britain and its colonial empire; the metropole had an excess of labour and capital while the colonies suffered from a dearth of both. Applying Britain’s surplus human and material resources to the development of colonial lands would help grow the overall economy by increasing the food supply and creating new markets for Britain’s manufactured goods. While he was a believer in free trade, Wakefield thought that the development of colonies with economies closely tied to Britain was an important form of

¹⁴ Weaver, *The Great Land Rush*, 202-08.

¹⁵ See Winthrop Pickard Bell, *The Foreign Protestants and the Settlement of Nova Scotia: The History of a Piece of Arrested British Colonial Policy in the Eighteenth Century* (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press; Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, 1990).

insurance against protectionism and key to maintaining Britain's prestige on the international stage.¹⁶

Wakefield believed that the alienation of crown land in the colonies should be tightly regulated by the state. He argued that free grants and cheap land sales had the effect of reducing the available supply of labour, which in turn discouraged investment and caused colonial development to stagnate. His alternative was to sell colonial lands at a "sufficient price" so that ownership was initially, but not permanently, out of reach for most new immigrants to the colonies. In the interim, immigrants would become part of a labour pool that would help capitalists develop their colonial investments. Wakefield believed that manipulating the price of land in this way would bring into being a social order that resembled that of England, particularly if the immigrants were well chosen. He considered the migration of couples or families superior to the migration of single persons because it would help ensure a balanced gender order that did not challenge the norms of moral propriety. In the places where Wakefield's system was implemented, such as South Australia, New Zealand, and Vancouver Island, it proved to be unworkable, either because the state had difficulty controlling access to land or because immigrants could not be attracted in sufficient numbers. But as Cole Harris has noted, Wakefield "put his finger on a set of important relationships between society and land."¹⁷

The same sort of political and economic thinking underlay the Canadian push for the annexation of Rupert's Land after mid-century. Deprived of both imperial trade

¹⁶ See Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *A View of the Art of Colonization in Present Reference to the British Empire; in Letters Between a Statesman and a Colonist* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1969 [1849]).

¹⁷ R. Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 5.

preferences and reciprocity with the United States, Canadians looked to the Northwest as a field of investment and economic growth. Consumer goods and agricultural implements produced in the east would be sold to western farmers who in turn would send grain and livestock east to feed the populations of growing cities. Effective occupation of the Northwest by settlers would also solidify British claims to sovereignty over the region and help defend against American designs on the territory.¹⁸ Once the transfer was complete in 1870, that claim to sovereignty had to be asserted internally as well, and the principle of land reservation was integral to that process. Reserves were utilized by the Canadian state for two broad purposes: to resolve preexisting land claims and to encourage immigration and capital investment. In the former category were reserves for Indians, Half-breeds, “original white settlers” and the Hudson’s Bay Company while in the latter were those for the Canadian Pacific Railway, other railways and various corporate colonization ventures.

At the core of the government’s policies was the goal of transforming western lands into private property, with clear boundaries determined by a uniform survey and registered according to a centralized system of land titles. The practice of reservation was a crucial intermediate step in this dramatic reorganization of the human geography and economic and social patterns of the region. In a piecemeal fashion, it established the new spatial and social distinctions between the Aboriginal and European populations, between different groups of settlers, and between the rights of corporations, individuals, and communities. Reserves were such a useful tool of colonization because their meaning was so capacious. For Aboriginal people and immigrants a land reserve could

¹⁸ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 162-63.

be understood as a means to continue an old pattern of life, to manage the transition to a new one, or to guarantee a level of economic security and continued autonomy in religious and cultural matters. To an individual or corporate speculator in western lands, a reserve grant represented an opportunity to translate government largesse into substantial capital gains. To the state, they were a way to manage the competing demands of achieving the effective colonization of a vast territory while at the same time avoiding costly wars with the indigenous population.

The Dominion Lands Act was the central piece of legislation relating to the alienation of crown lands in the Canadian Northwest. From its inception in 1872 until its repeal in 1930, the Act underwent a myriad number of changes both large and small. Some of these addressed unforeseen circumstances that arose during the colonization process, while others claimed to be aimed at curbing the abuses of speculators. But in general, the key elements of the Act relating to survey and land administration remained relatively constant. For the most part these provisions were adapted from the U.S. Homestead Act of 1862. The guiding principle of Dominion policy after 1870 was to ensure that the Canadian Northwest emerged as a viable and competitive alternative to the United States in the fierce competition for agricultural settlers.¹⁹ The Dominion Lands Survey system divided the land into square townships, each containing thirty-six sections of 640 acres, which were in turn sub-divided into quarter sections of 160 acres

¹⁹ For what is still the most thorough treatment of the subject, see Chester Martin, *"Dominion Lands" policy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973). For an excellent summary of the first decade, see James M. Richtik, "The Policy Framework for Settling the Canadian West, 1870-1880," *Agricultural History* 49, no. 4 (1975): 613-28.

(See figure 2.2).²⁰ This system of land survey established the familiar geometric pattern of the prairie landscape, but more importantly it provided the method for the Dominion government to quantify and administer the vast land, timber, water and mineral resources of the Northwest. The 160 acre quarter section was the basic unit of land available to be claimed as a free grant homestead by "any person, male or female, who is the sole head of a family" or a single adult male.²¹ A patent to the homestead could be secured after residing on and cultivating the land for three years, and payment of a \$10 office fee. Applications for homestead could be cancelled if the entrant did not meet the requirements, which frequently occurred. The Canadian system included innovations that were intended to be more generous than their U.S. counterpart. For example, the Canadian law provided the option of claiming the quarter section adjoining the homestead as a "pre-emption" that could be later purchased at the Government price of one dollar per acre.²² Between 1870 and 1928, approximately sixty-two million acres were permanently alienated through homestead and pre-emption. Securing individual title was far more difficult for Aboriginal people than for European immigrants. This required that they go through the process of "enfranchisement" in which they had to prove that they were free of debt, able to read and write English, and of good moral standing. To

²⁰ As Richtik points out, the core Dominion Lands policies were put into practice before the passage of the Act, under a Privy Council Order of 25 April 1871. See Richtik, "The Policy Framework," 616. For a more detailed history of the Dominion Lands Survey, see Don W. Thomson, *Men and Meridians: The History of Surveying and Mapping in Canada*, 3 vols. (Ottawa: Queen's printer, 1966).

²¹ *Dominion Lands Act, Statutes of Canada*, 1872, 35 Vic. c. 23 s. 33. The original minimum age was twenty-one, but this was changed to eighteen in 1874.

²² Richtik, "The Policy Framework," 618-19.

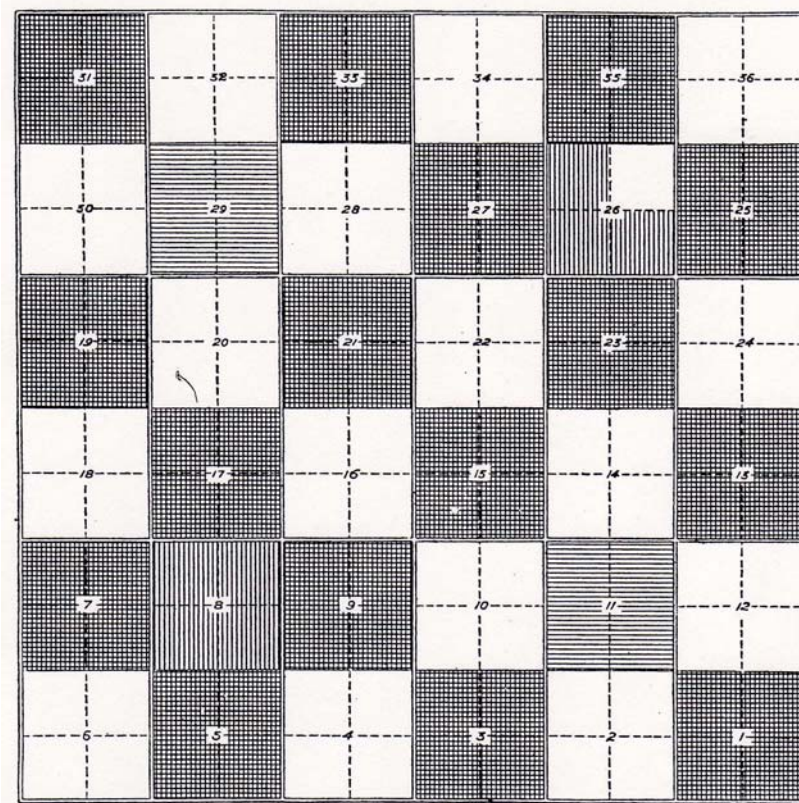


Figure 2.2. Dominion Lands Survey Township Grid. The even-numbered sections were available as free homesteads. Beginning in 1879, the odd-numbered sections were reserved for sale, and most were granted to the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. Section 8 and three-quarters of section 26 were reserved for the Hudson's Bay Company, and sections 11 and 29 were reserved for sale to endow the public schools system. *Source*: Chester Martin, "Dominion Lands" Policy (Ottawa: Carleton Library Series, 1973 [1938]), 18.

travel this path, they would have to agree to relinquish any claim to Indian status.²³ Apart from homestead duties and fees, settlers had to pass the much lower bar of naturalization as British subjects, a process that essentially involved swearing an oath and did not require any special linguistic attainments or standards of moral propriety.

A similar volume of land was sold over the same period, both by the government and by recipients of large land grants. A portion of the lands sold by the government,

²³ Sarah Carter, "Aboriginal People of Canada and the British Empire," in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 208.

about nine million acres, were the school lands. The Dominion Lands Act reserved sections eleven and twenty-nine in every township as school lands. Once the surrounding sections had been settled, the school sections were auctioned off to the highest bidder in order to build an endowment for public education. Just behind the school lands in size, at seven million acres, was the grant to the Hudson's Bay Company. This amounted to the reservation of section eight and three-quarters of section twenty-six in every township. The largest land grants by far were to the Canadian Pacific and other railway lines, which amounted to over thirty-one million acres by 1930.²⁴

Over the same period, an unknown quantity of land was reserved for various private colonization schemes.²⁵ Various forms of colonization reserves were utilized by both Conservative and Liberal administrations from 1872 until the first decade of the twentieth century. The aim was to create the conditions that would encourage the movement of both capital and labour into the Northwest (see figure 2.3). Reserving tracts of land was believed to do this in two ways: first, by offering financial incentives to private investors for promoting the settlement of agricultural migrants on specific tracts of land. Second, by appealing to the perceived tendency of migrants of the same linguistic and cultural background to settle in compact, homogeneous communities. In this way, the mammoth task of western colonization could be sub-divided into smaller units that would advance the overarching project block by block. This practice

²⁴ Martin, *"Dominion Lands" policy*, 227-28. All the amounts of acreage given in the following section are drawn from Martin.

²⁵ Martin's detailed accounting of land distribution under the Dominion Lands system did not include these reserves, possibly because he anticipated that they would be dealt with in the projected third volume of the Canadian Frontiers of Settlement series, D.A. McArthur and W.A. Carrothers, *History of Immigration Policy and Company Colonization*, which unfortunately never materialized.

underwent several changes, shifted in and out of favour, and yielded mixed results, since failure and settlement abandonment were relatively commonplace. As A.W. Rasporich has pointed out, the possibility of group settlement in the Northwest inspired a wide array of short-lived experiments in pastoral utopianism aimed either at reconstituting a vanishing way of life or projecting a new vision of an idealized society. Various forms of utopian socialism were sometimes their inspiration, but more frequently their ideological inspiration was drawn from different shades of liberalism.²⁶

For many of the Icelandic immigrants, the utopian appeal of the reserve was that it seemed to provide an opportunity to fulfill the ethnic-nationalist ambition of creating a “United Icelandic colony” in North America. Between 1873 and 1875, Icelanders had founded small settlements or explored lands in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Minnesota and had explored locations as far away as Alaska. Lively debates over the strengths and weaknesses of each location played out in Icelandic newspapers, at public meetings, and in private correspondence. Many of the Icelanders’ intellectual and spiritual leaders framed the search for a colony in nationalistic terms, and emphasized the goals of cultural autonomy and ethnic homogeneity.²⁷ The Canadian government’s offer of an exclusive colonization reserve found a receptive audience among those who shared this vision.²⁸ Among migrants more concerned with material improvement than cultural

²⁶ A.W. Rasporich, "Utopian Ideals and Community Settlements in Western Canada, 1880-1914," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 372-73.

²⁷ See Ryan C. Eyford, "Icelandic Migration to Canada, 1872-1875: New Perspectives on the 'Myth of Beginnings'" (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2003), 118-46.

²⁸ Minutes of the Icelandic Meeting at Kinmount, Ontario, 31 May 1875 in LAC, RG 17, A-I-1, volume 315, docket 14103, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 June 1875.

autonomy, the report of the Icelandic delegation generated hope that the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg offered all the advantages that could be hoped for in a colony site—an abundance of land, water, and forest resources in a location close to major transportation routes.

But whatever multiple meanings they may have had for the parties involved, the net effect of reservations was a deepening of the power of the state over the allocation of land and property rights. The promise of autonomy within a limited sphere was largely illusory, since other aspects of state power ensured that “reserved spaces” were what Henri Lefebvre called “places of initiation within social space.”²⁹ Whether for Aboriginal people or immigrant settlers, reserves were social laboratories whose purpose was to assimilate their communities into an Anglo-Canadian agrarian economic, political and social order. The difference between Aboriginal and immigrant reserves was more of degree than type, with the former being subjected to a much more highly coercive regime of economic, social and cultural control and surveillance than the latter. In both cases though, government officials assumed that eventually these reserves would cease to exist, and their inhabitants would assimilate into the dominant Anglo-Canadian society. In this sense, colonization reserves in the Canadian Northwest represented an updated version of Wakefield’s ideas about using access to land as a means to shape colonial society. The core principle of Wakefieldian systematic colonization—using directed migration and land allocation to develop compact settlement colonies with desired socio-economic characteristics—endured even if Wakefield’s preferred mechanism of social engineering,

²⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 35.

the sufficient price of land, had been superseded by the Dominion Lands Act's free homestead system.

The original 1872 version of the Dominion Lands Act did not make any provisions for group settlement by corporate or collective entities, despite a plethora of applications from individuals and organizations promoting various schemes of systematic colonization after 1870.³⁰ However, in the fall of 1872 John A. Macdonald's Conservative government began experimenting with colonization reserves. In the mid-1870s the Liberal administration of Alexander Mackenzie expanded the policy, and it continued in a modified form after Macdonald's return to power in 1878. Group settlement through the formal and informal reservation of land remained an aspect of Dominion Lands policy well into the Laurier era. In spite of their importance, the genesis of colonization reserve has remained somewhat of a mystery.

An important and previously overlooked clue is contained in a series of letters that British Columbia immigration agent Gilbert Malcolm Sproat submitted to the Minister of Agriculture in the spring of 1872. In three characteristically long-winded epistles, Sproat, better known for his work on the Joint Indian Reserve Commission in British Columbia,³¹ laid out a comprehensive proposal for "farming colonies" in British Columbia and the Northwest. Sproat's treatise was largely a warmed over version of some of the central assumptions of Wakefieldian systematic colonization, combined with observations about contemporary railway and land policy in the United States. This is not surprising; Sproat had been involved in various schemes to bring white settlers to

³⁰ Norman P. Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 235-36.

³¹ See Harris, *Making Native Space*, 104-66.

British Columbia since Wakefield's ideas were at the height of their popularity. By 1871 Sproat had managed to turn his voluntary efforts into an official appointment as "Agent General" for British Columbia, doing his best to promote the province from an ill-funded London office.³² During this time he travelled widely through the United States, studying the progress of settlement in the Midwest and Pacific regions. Sproat argued that the Dominion government could draw important lessons from the U.S. experience, and was particularly enamoured of farm colonies organized by private colonization companies and backed by British and American capital.

Sproat thought that group settlement was preferable to individual settlement. He argued that the beneficial effects of the former mitigated against the deleterious effects of the latter. Farm colonies could be a force for morality, progress, and nation building in frontier contexts where the bonds of civilization often became tenuous and fragmented. He referred in particular to how individual settlers had "caused their government enormous trouble and expense by inconsiderate treatment of the aborigines." He advocated a humane and just Indian policy, which would also bring about greater separation between settler and native populations; "I would not recommend reservations for Indians to be placed...in the probable direction of settlement." Sproat's vision was of a colonial landscape divided into compartments, ostensibly to prevent conflict but clearly also to avoid the potentially disruptive influence of the mixing of populations on the

³² Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 135.

emergence of “wholesome social system” that would produce the “ruling race of this continent.”³³

Sproat contended that the twin problems that group settlement could address were isolation and disorganization. “Organized colonies, controlling large tracts seemed to have special facilities for keeping the houses together in small villages or hamlets.” He believed this would allow families of settlers to live in “society instead of solitude” and therefore contribute to the moral uplift and material progress of settlers and their children. Individualistic settlement had undeniably been important in the United States and other colonial contexts, but in Sproat’s opinion its disorganized character had impeded the larger colonization process: “These frontier men may assist in preparing wild lands for cultivation, but they do not add any moral force to a nation. Their children, if they have any, are very unfortunately situated. The isolation in which families are placed when settlers are thinly spread over a vast territory is decidedly a bar also to mere material progress.” In addition to family migration, he believed group settlement would work best when old ties of kin, community, religion, and social beliefs were transplanted: “The colonies would be composed, sometimes of men of one religion or all pledged to temperance, or connected by some bond of that sort, but usually of families from the same locality, generally old neighbours and acquaintances, who, once they were located, would attract to their settlements annually a considerable number of recruits from their former homes.”³⁴

³³ LAC, RG 17, “Immigration Branch” series [hereafter A III 2], volume 2397, G.M. Sproat to J.H. Pope, Letter 'A', 27 March 1872.

³⁴ LAC, RG 17, A III 2, volume 2397, G.M. Sproat to J.H. Pope, Letter 'A', 27 March 1872.

The wholesome social system Sproat envisioned for the Canadian Northwest and British Columbia was not to be a communal one. The farm colonies along the route of the Kansas and Colorado railroad lines that he had studied were cooperative in only a very limited sense:

The principal and almost the only co-operative feature about them, consists in the joint purchase by each party of colonists of one large tract of land, which is at once subdivided and deeded in fee simple in lots to the individual members, the values of each lot being equalized in the apportionment. Community of profits is no part of the plan; after the apportionment each man works for himself, and he can sell his land, if he likes.³⁵

Each of Sproat's three letters to the Minister of Agriculture were in essence about the process by which the Dominion government could efficiently transfer its vast new territories into private hands in a way that promoted development rather than speculation. He hoped to convince the government to alter pending legislation that reserved lands twenty miles on each side of the proposed line of the Canadian Pacific Railway, with alternate sections being granted to the railway.³⁶ These terms were similar to railway grants in the U.S., which Sproat considered to be "regrettable." The railways sold their lands at much higher prices than the government, and thus diverted capital that could have been utilized by the colonists to develop their farms or had the effect of reducing the number of settlers who could afford to purchase lands, whether on their own or as part of a joint venture.³⁷

³⁵ LAC, RG 17, A III 2, volume 2397, G.M. Sproat to J.H. Pope, Letter 'A', 27 March 1872.

³⁶ *Statutes of Canada*, 1872, 35 Vic, c.71; Richtik, "The Policy Framework," 623.

³⁷ LAC, RG 17, A III 2, volume 2397, G.M. Sproat to J.H. Pope, Letter 'A', 27 March 1872.

Although Sproat was critical of U.S. railway companies, he at the same time called for the Dominion government to follow the policies of the Northern Pacific Railroad: “Though I do not affirm that what is proper for a corporation is necessarily proper for a Government... the Canadian gov’t might safely follow in their steps.”³⁸ This did not mean that the government should undertake colonization projects itself; according to Sproat, experience had shown that large-scale group colonization projects were best left in private hands; apart from adjudicating the merits of specific proposals, the government’s role was to enact and enforce regulations to protect immigrants from exploitation and neglect. Sproat believed that the government should mimic the Northern Pacific’s practice of granting tracts of land to individuals or small companies who were paid either on a commission basis or through discounts on land purchases.

At the heart of Sproat’s eighty-page dissertation was a request to have Parliament reserve “a million acres between Manitobah [sic] and British Columbia” to be “settled systematically by degrees.” Each parcel of 100,000 acres would be granted to a company that would coordinate the immigration and colonization process, receiving a commission for their efforts. Not surprisingly, Sproat offered to organize “the Central Canadian Land Co.” to undertake the colonization of one such tract.³⁹ In this ambition Sproat was ultimately disappointed, but his ideas may have had a significant impact on the government’s policies. Speaking before the House of Commons Immigration and Colonization Committee in 1878, Department of Agriculture Secretary John Lowe

³⁸ LAC, RG 17, A III 2, volume 2397, G.M. Sproat to J.H. Pope, Letter 'C', 1 April 1872.

³⁹ LAC, RG 17, A III 2, volume 2397, G.M. Sproat to J.H. Pope, Letter 'C', 1 April 1872.

described how the government's colonization reserve policy was modeled on the methods used by railway and land companies of the Western United States.⁴⁰

While the exact impact of Sproat's treatise is unknown, it is suggestive that the Dominion government's first attempt to promote group colonization in the Northwest occurred a few months after Sproat submitted his letters, and largely conformed to his recommendations. A September 1872 Order in Council approved a grant of 100,000 acres in Manitoba and the Northwest for a Swiss immigration scheme spearheaded by a certain Dr. Foos.⁴¹ Two more colonization projects were approved in October and November of the same year, one for German immigrants put forward by the German Society of Montreal and another for Scottish immigrants under the direction of David Shaw, a former government emigration agent.⁴² These initial plans were somewhat vague; the Orders-in-Council did not mention any specific lands, but rather approved the projects in principle and gave the Minister of Agriculture authority to make further arrangements. Once the reserve was granted, it was incumbent upon the promoters to recruit settlers for their allotted tracts. This turned out to be a difficult task; the Swiss project never materialized, and the Scottish and German reserves were rescinded after their promoters failed to bring out any actual settlers. The approach proved more successful in attracting groups of prospective migrants actively searching for a settlement site, as in the case of the Mennonites from Russia. In March 1873, after visits by Mennonite delegations to Manitoba and successful negotiations with the Dominion government over the terms of their resettlement in Canada, a reserve of nine townships in

⁴⁰ Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of Canada*, 1878, pp. 20-21.

⁴¹ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1872-0847.

⁴² LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1872-0981 and 1872-1079.

southeastern Manitoba was set aside "for the exclusive use by settlement, of Germans in Russia—Mennonites and others."⁴³

In the spring of 1874, Alexander Mackenzie's Liberal government brought the previously *ad hoc* practices of land reservation for colonization purposes under the purview of the Dominion Lands Act. The Act was amended to give the Governor in Council power to "withdraw any...township from public sale or general settlement" that an individual or group undertook to settle "in the proportion of one family to each alternate quarter section." In return for bringing out settlers and establishing them on their lands "free of expense to the government" the promoters of such schemes were given the opportunity to purchase additional lands in the same townships at a "reduced rate"—the standard government price for lands in the Northwest being \$1 per acre.⁴⁴ What had been altered from Wakefield's scheme was not the principle but the mechanism. Rather than manipulating the price of land to force migrants to improve the lands of others, they would work their own homesteads, but in doing so would indirectly increase the value of the surrounding lands that the private promoters of the colonization schemes had the option of purchasing at a discount from the government.

Between 1874 and 1877 the Mackenzie government created nine colonization reserves encompassing approximately 1.3 million acres.⁴⁵ Some of these projects, such as Robert F. Rowan's plan to settle Danish immigrants west of Lake Manitoba, were undertaken by individual promoters.⁴⁶ Others were sponsored by organizations with

⁴³ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1873-0226.

⁴⁴ *Statutes of Canada*, 1874, 37 Vic. c. 19 s. 14.

⁴⁵ For a description of all the various colonization reserves granted in this period, see Richtik, "Manitoba Settlement", 160-69.

⁴⁶ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1875-0256.

linguistic, religious, and cultural ties to the prospective settlers, such as the Saint-Boniface based *Société de Colonisation de Manitoba* that, beginning in 1874, worked toward the repatriation of French Canadians living in New England.⁴⁷ In 1876, seventeen townships west of the Red River were earmarked for a second Mennonite Reserve,⁴⁸ which, like the east reserve established in 1873, was sponsored by the long-established Mennonite community in Ontario. The Icelandic reserve was the sixth reserve created in this period, and was unique in that no private organization was involved in the project. Officially, John Taylor was the individual promoter of the scheme, but he did not have the means to contribute to the project financially. Instead, he and the Department of Agriculture made an unsuccessful attempted to enlist the Hudson's Bay Company in this role in order to encourage it to take a more active role in promoting colonization.⁴⁹

A majority of the colonization reserves established under the 1874 regulations failed to attract settlers. By 1877 the Mackenzie government had lost faith in the policy, and decided to open a number of reserves where no progress had been made. Minister of the Interior David Mills stated that while these reserves had been intended to spur settlement they had actually proved to be a drag on its progress by locking up lands.⁵⁰ The Icelandic reserve was among those that Surveyor General J.S. Dennis recommended

⁴⁷ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1875-0256.

⁴⁸ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1876-0397.

⁴⁹ LAC, RG 17, "Secret and Confidential Correspondence" series [hereafter A I 4], volume 1629, Confidential Memorandum, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 17 October 1876. See Chapter 7 for more.

⁵⁰ Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 7, 1877, p. xx.

be continued, since "...the scheme still remains upon trial, the settlement so far, not having been marked by very much success."⁵¹

After their return to power in 1878, the Macdonald Conservatives initially shied away from privately sponsored group settlement projects, but by the early 1880s returned to the idea and expanded its scope dramatically. The basic principle at the heart of the Liberals' 1874 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act remained the same, but a more detailed legal framework was developed to encompass the triangular relationship among the government, private promoters of colonization, and migrant settlers. Between 1881 and 1887, this took the form of a short-lived experiment in bloc land sales to private colonization companies. From the mid-1880s onward, the more enduring practice of establishing 'nominal reserves' for non-English speaking European immigrants became common. Colonization companies and group settlements have often been considered as separate topics⁵² but in reality they were simply different aspects of the same approach to colonization, one that aimed to be systematic and highly profitable for individuals and groups with an interest in Northwest lands.

In the early 1880s, the prospect that the long-delayed Canadian Pacific Railway would soon be completed set off a speculative land boom in Manitoba and the North-West Territories. The government looked to land sales as a method to recoup the massive cash and land subsidies granted to the private CPR to undertake the task. The odd-numbered sections in the townships adjacent to the main railway line or any branch lines

⁵¹ LAC, Department of the Interior fonds, RG 15 [hereafter RG 15], "Dominion Lands Branch" series [hereafter D II 1], volume 239, file 13765 reel T-12320, J.S. Dennis to the Minister of the Interior, 20 April 1877.

⁵² See, for example, Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization*, 197-256.

were granted to the railways. However, under regulations introduced in 1881, individuals and corporations could obtain the right to buy all the odd numbered sections in tracts away from the railway belt for \$2 per acre. These colonization companies were required to locate at least two settlers on each section of the tract over a five-year period. If the company was successful in fulfilling its obligations, it would receive a rebate of \$160 per *bona fide* settler from the government, effectively reducing the purchase price of the land to \$1 per acre. The company could sell the land to settlers for between \$3 and \$15 per acre, thereby reaping a huge profit on its initial investment.⁵³ At first, there was widespread enthusiasm for this plan; Conservative party insiders and rank and file supporters were at the front of the line for land grants, and many were successful. Other applications came from British and European capitalists, church and philanthropic organizations, and even fraternal and workingmen's associations. In the Icelandic reserve, Sigtryggur Jónasson, Friðjón Friðriksson and their German-Canadian partner Ferdinand Osenbrugge proposed the formation of a company that would pay off the colonists' debts to the government in return for title to the abandoned and undeveloped land in the reserve, which they would then resettle with Icelandic, Scandinavian and German immigrants. The Minister of Agriculture was in favour of the plan, but the Department of the Interior rejected it for unknown reasons.⁵⁴

This was not an uncommon fate for prospective colonization companies. Out of two hundred and sixty applications received by the Department of the Interior between

⁵³ André Lalonde, "Settlement in the North-West Territories by Colonization Companies, 1881-1891" (PhD dissertation, Laval University, 1969), 43-45.

⁵⁴ LAC, RG 17, General Letterbooks series [hereafter A I 2], reel T-119, volume 1534, p. 191, Lowe to Burgess, 22 May 1882; LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 358, docket 38365, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 1 January 1883.

December 1881 and June 1882 only one hundred and six were approved. Of these, three quarters were either unable to meet the initial financial requirements or unwilling to commit themselves to the terms of the contractual agreement with the Department of Interior. In the end only twenty-six colonization companies became operational. These companies were placed in possession of just over 1.3 million acres, far short of the ten million acres that the government had hoped to sell to private capitalists.⁵⁵ The scheme was therefore considered a failure from the outset, and its prospects did not improve over time. Hopes of quick and easy profits soon evaporated into a cloud of debt, disappointment, and failure. Of the small number of migrants then heading to the Northwest, few could be convinced to buy company lands in isolated locations when there still was ample homestead land available closer to the projected railway lines. For those who did come, the harsh realities of pioneering in the Northwest, including adverse climatic conditions, lack of infrastructure, and poor access to markets proved discouraging. In 1886-87, the government dissolved the surviving companies and abandoned the experiment. In their five years of operation, the colonization companies brought a combined total of only 1,080 settlers to the Northwest.⁵⁶ During the same period tiny Iceland sent at least 3,819 migrants to Canada.⁵⁷

Beginning in the mid-1880s, the Dominion government, the CPR and the Manitoba and North West Railway partnered with individuals and philanthropic organizations that had initiated schemes involving the settlement of Hungarians, Jews, Scandinavians, Scottish Highlanders, Germans, and Romanians in western Manitoba and

⁵⁵ Lalonde, "Settlement in the North-West Territories", 59-71.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 258-59.

⁵⁷ Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, Reports of the Department of Agriculture, 1883-1888.

the North-West Territories. The Dominion Lands Act allowed the railway companies to advance money to the settlers for the purchase of provisions, implements, building materials and other supplies. This money amounted to a lien on the homestead, which had to be repaid with interest before the patent was issued.⁵⁸ Thingvalla, the first Icelandic settlement in what became Saskatchewan, was begun under this sort of arrangement in 1886.⁵⁹

Arthur Morton called these group settlements “nominal reserves” because homesteading within them was technically not restricted to one ethno-religious group.⁶⁰ Whereas the colonization reserves of the 1870s were the created through Orders-in-Council granting members of an ethno-religious group exclusive right to homestead within a prescribed space, the nominal reserves of the mid-1880s to the early twentieth century were more a matter of administrative prerogative on the part of the Department of the Interior.

Nominal reserves were used extensively during the frenetic period of immigration that coincided with Clifford Sifton’s tenure as Minister of the Interior. Between 1896 and 1905 Sifton streamlined administrative practices and expanded recruitment efforts into Central and Eastern Europe at a time when the declining availability of land in the United States made the Canadian Northwest an increasingly attractive destination for thousands of European immigrants.⁶¹ Once the migrants arrived at Winnipeg,

⁵⁸ Arthur S. Morton and Chester Martin, *History of Prairie Settlement/ "Dominion Lands" Policy* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1938), 76. For more on this practice, see Chapter 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶¹ See D.J. Hall, "Clifford Sifton: Immigration and Settlement Policy," in *The Settlement of the West*, ed. Howard Palmer (Calgary: University of Calgary/Comprint

colonization agents and land guides directed them to compact tracts in designated areas. At the same time as Sifton's administration was creating *de facto* reserves for new arrivals such as Ukrainians, Doukhobors and others, old colonization reserves were being abolished. In July 1897, on Sifton's recommendation, the Icelandic reserve on Lake Winnipeg was opened to sale and homestead entry "by any class of settlers who may wish to locate in that vicinity" owing to the fact that "the purpose for which this Reserve was originally made has now been fully served."⁶² Part of the reason for this change was that newly arrived Ukrainian settlers were being directed into the Interlake on lands adjacent to the Icelandic reserve.⁶³ This decision to abolish a formal reserve while at the same time creating a new informal one was consistent with the Dominion government's perspective on colonization reserves since the 1870s. Spatial segregation of various ethno-religious groups was considered a temporary evil that had to be tolerated in order to realize the larger goal of extensive western colonization.

During the roughly half a century in which they were utilized, the Dominion government was often subjected to intense criticism over its use of colonization reserves. This opposition coalesced around two broad issues: reserves as barriers to land acquisition and group settlement as a threat to a particular vision of the future racial, political, and social composition of western Canadian settler society. In the 1870s, opponents of so-called "land-lock" alleged that reserves of all types frustrated the

Publishing, 1977). For a more detailed account of Sifton's career see D. J. Hall, *Clifford Sifton. Volume 1, The Young Napoleon, 1861-1900* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981); D. J. Hall, *Clifford Sifton. Volume 2, A Lonely Eminence, 1901-1929* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985).

⁶² LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1897-2306.

⁶³ See Michael Ewanchuk, *Spruce, Swamp and Stone: A History of the Pioneer Ukrainian Settlements in the Gimli area* (Winnipeg: the author, 1977).

legitimate aspirations of *bona fide* Anglo-Canadian farmers wishing to acquire Dominion lands in the Northwest.⁶⁴ In 1876, the editor of the *Free Press* claimed that Manitoba had been “reserved to death by Acts of Parliament” and presented the supposedly representative story of a Canadian migrant with a young family who had tried to find a homestead, but each time learned that he had chosen a quarter section reserved for Half-breeds, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Pacific Railway or some special colonization project.⁶⁵ Opponents of land reservation often complained that while the Dominion government made reserves for Indians, Half-breeds, French-Canadian Catholics and foreigners, no reserves were set aside for English speakers from Ontario or the British Isles.⁶⁶ This was not only inaccurate—there were formal reserves for British settlers and cases of rule-bending by Dominion Lands administrators that allowed for compact settlement of Ontario migrants⁶⁷—but also ignored the privileged position of Anglo-Canadian settlers in the overall Dominion Lands system. The townships “open” for homestead and sale were, for all intents and purposes, closed to the Aboriginal people. In selecting the best tracts from among the available lands settlers from Ontario also had the edge over non-English speaking immigrants, who had to learn to operate within a new legal and institutional framework.

⁶⁴ Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 178.

⁶⁵ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 13 June 1876.

⁶⁶ Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 159.

⁶⁷ In 1876 four townships near Lake Manitoba were reserved for English and Welsh colonists to be brought by former Allan Line Agent Spencer A. Jones. In 1878 a tract of land west of the Pembina River was closed to sale and scrip application to allow close settlement by a group of Ontarians. See Richtik, "Manitoba Settlement", 160, 66. John Langton Tyman, *By Section, Township and Range: Studies in Prairie Settlement* (Brandon, MB: Assiniboine Historical Society, 1972), 85-103.

Half-breed and railway reserves were the main targets of Anglo-Canadian settler enmity, because they presented a barrier to the acquisition of choice agricultural land in the vicinity of Winnipeg. While the railway reserves were considered to be a relatively simple matter of altering government railway policy, the issue of Métis lands was bound up with the deeply rooted racial and sectarian antagonisms of 1870s Manitoba. The *Free Press* alleged that Half-breed reserves were part of a conspiracy on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to gain control of the province's best lands for its own people, and asserted that the French-speaking Métis were not interested in pursuing sedentary agriculture and that they would gladly dispose of their rights to land for cash payments at the earliest possible opportunity.⁶⁸ Other commentators, such as MP James Trow, Chair of Immigration and Colonization Committee, noted the widespread subterfuge practiced by speculators and settlers in obtaining title to Métis lands. Nonetheless, Trow believed the Half-breed reserves were a barrier to progress and that bringing them into the market was "a step in the right direction."⁶⁹ The immigrant Icelanders soon came to share the Anglo-Canadian perspective; an 1879 petition to the Dominion government from disaffected settlers in the reserve complained that the Half-breed and railway reserves to the south of New Iceland created "difficulty in communicating with other civilised people."⁷⁰

The colonies of Mennonites and Icelanders were only rarely swept up in the general condemnation of reserves. Reverend George Bryce called the Mennonite and

⁶⁸ *Manitoba Weekly Free Press*, 5 August 1876.

⁶⁹ James Trow, *Manitoba and North West Territories: Letters...Together with Information Relative to Acquiring Dominion Lands, Cost of Outfit, etc.* (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1878), 17-19.

⁷⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 247, docket 25445, Petition to the Dominion Government of Canada, March 1879.

Icelandic reserves “real benefits” because they had resulted in the colonization of lands that Canadians had either bypassed or not yet begun to settle.⁷¹ However, many Anglo-Canadians considered the lack of interaction between the “foreign colonies” and the English-speaking settler community to be problematic because it delayed assimilation. In 1876, the *Free Press* questioned the wisdom of appropriating “large blocks for exclusive settlement by alien people of foreign customs, language, and institutions.” The editor argued that it would be much better to intersperse them with English-speaking colonists in order “to produce homogeneity of nationality in the near future.”⁷² In his 1879 immigration pamphlet *The Prairie Lands of Canada*, Thomas Spence recommended the “colony system” as an advantageous and economical method of colonization; “neighbors in the old land may be neighbours in the new; friends may settle near each other, form communities and the nucleus of new settlements and towns, establish schools and, in short, avoiding the many of the traditional hardships which have usually attended pioneer life.”⁷³

The same sorts of debates about colonization reserves continued over the ensuing decades. In the 1880s, Liberals denounced the Conservative government for handing over vast stretches of public lands in the Northwest to railways and colonization companies with an eye for profit rather than serving the interests of agrarian settlers. At the end of the century, bi-partisan critics of Sifton’s policies objected to what they perceived as the special treatment afforded to Ukrainians and Doukhobors, and lamented the deleterious impact of foreign colonies on the racial, social, and cultural fabric of

⁷¹ *Manitoba Weekly Free Press*, 12 August 1876.

⁷² *Manitoba Weekly Free Press*, 29 July 1876.

⁷³ Thomas Spence, *The Prairie Lands of Canada* (Montreal: Gazette Printing House, 1879), 47.

Anglo-Canadian settler society. These critics echoed the earlier calls for integrated settlement, since “[t]he colony system tends to perpetuate their own language and peculiar customs.”⁷⁴

This debate was in essence about race, specifically about the potential and appropriate methods for turning European immigrants into British subjects who spoke English, wholeheartedly accepted British institutions, and observed the same social customs and standards of moral propriety. Sifton had a marginally more inclusive conception of who was fit to become a Canadian citizen than did many of his contemporaries. His judgments about the different races were based on perceptions about which ones had characteristics that made them likely to become successful farmers in the Canadian West. For Sifton, this excluded African-Americans, Italians, Jews, East and South Asians and even English urbanites.⁷⁵ In encouraging group settlement, Sifton’s ambition was to foster internally resilient immigrant communities that had the necessary skills and ambition to contribute to the agricultural development of the west. He anticipated that these distinctive European ethno-religious communities would eventually be drawn into the Anglo-Canadian mainstream through their commercial and institutional contacts with the wider society.⁷⁶

An important part of this process was turning the immigrants into property holders. Although the colonization reserve land was available only to members of the collectivity, they were still subject to the Dominion Lands Act in relation to both the

⁷⁴ *Winnipeg Telegram*, 3 February 1899 quoted in John C. Lehr, "The Government and the Immigrant: Perspectives on Ukrainian Block Settlement in the Canadian West," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 9, no. 2 (1977): 45.

⁷⁵ Hall, "Clifford Sifton," 77.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 79-81.

system of survey and regulations governing the acquisition of a free grant homesteads. In this sense, colonization reserves did not so much deviate from the homestead system as provide a means to its rapid implementation. Still, rules were sometimes bent to accommodate the wishes of distinct ethno-religious communities. The Mennonites, as a condition of their settlement in Manitoba, negotiated special group rights that afforded their communities considerable autonomy in matters of social, political and spatial organization within the confines of their reservation.⁷⁷ They imported from Russia their practice of living in villages called *strassendoerfer*, which were divided into five and six acre *Fiastaeden* on which the settlers had their residence. The surrounding land was worked as open fields held in common by the village.⁷⁸

John Taylor's settlement plans for the Icelandic reserve led Canadian officials to believe that the Icelanders would follow a communal pattern of land use similar to the Mennonites.⁷⁹ Prior to leaving for the reserve with the first group of colonists, Taylor presented a plan of village settlement to the Canadian Surveyor General, Colonel J.S. Dennis. Rather than settling families on 160-acre homesteads, the Icelanders would be "congregated in long narrow villages close to and parallel with the [lake] shore for convenience of fishing, boating, &c."⁸⁰ The villages would consist of lots, approximately one acre in size, arranged in double rows, with north-south streets running in front and behind and intersected by cross streets at regular intervals (See Figure 2.3). The lands to the rear of the villages would be developed for agricultural use, but there would be no

⁷⁷ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1873-0226.

⁷⁸ Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 76.

⁷⁹ "Annual Report of the Surveyor General (J.S. Dennis)" in Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 7, 1876.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

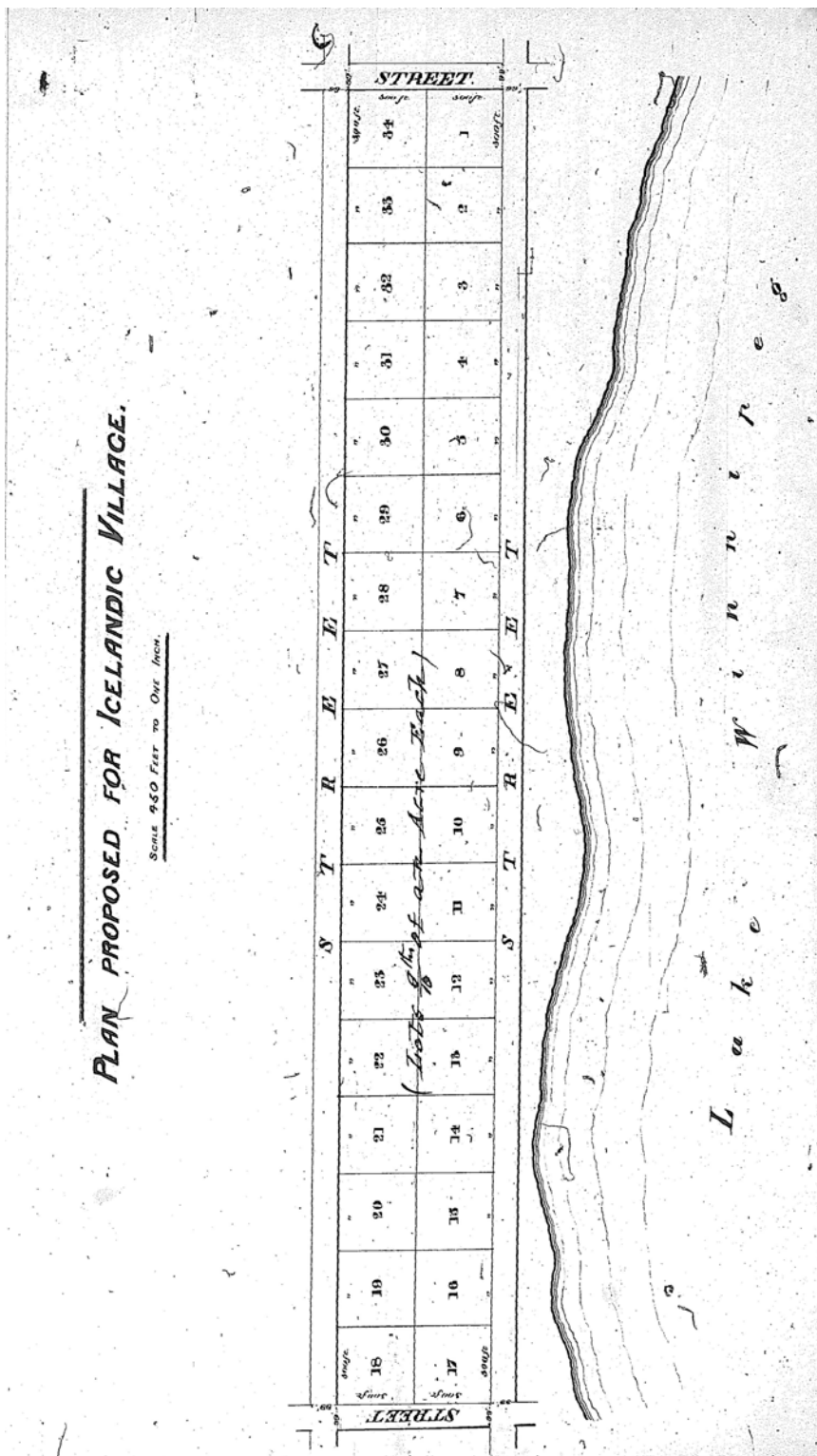


Figure 2.3. John Taylor’s “Plan Proposed for Icelandic Village,” October 1875. Source: LAC, RG 15, D II 1, reel T-12183, volume 235, file 5088.

residences built on them.⁸¹ Taylor claimed that this was the way “the communities exist in Iceland”⁸² by which he undoubtedly meant Iceland’s small coastal fishing villages and trading centres—the only tiny pockets of urban life in what was otherwise a completely rural society. Dennis instructed Dominion Land Surveyor George McPhillips to accompany the Icelanders to the reserve and help Taylor put his plans into effect.

On 22 October 1875, McPhillips and Taylor travelled north along the coast to locate the site for “...a village or Town which [the Icelanders’] named Gimli.”⁸³ A few days later some of the Icelanders who had been exploring the region suggested that the village be moved further north but the surveyor overruled them. For the next month McPhillips and his crew, which by this time included the Icelanders Páll Jóhannesson and Árni Þorláksson, worked at laying out a plan for Gimli and the surrounding township in order to connect it to the larger survey grid, while the Icelanders hurriedly erected shelters before the onset of winter. The resulting pattern of settlement of the new village was far less systematic than either Taylor or McPhillips had hoped: “...as it was impossible for me to have their lots surveyed for them in time to build on them they commenced to build promiscuously on the Beach where they landed...”⁸⁴

In commenting on Taylor’s plan, Dennis told the Minister of the Interior that it represented a “...departure from the mode of settlement now provided in the Dominion

⁸¹ Ibid.; LAC, RG 15, D II 1, volume 235, file 5088, J.S. Dennis to the Minister of the Interior, 1 November 1875.

⁸² LAC, RG 15, D II 1, volume 235, file 5088, J.S. Dennis to the Minister of the Interior, 1 November 1875.

⁸³ AM, GR 1601, Surveyors’ Field Books, no. 607.

⁸⁴ AM, GR 1601, Surveyors’ Field Books, no. 607.

Lands Act” that would probably require legalization by the Privy Council.⁸⁵ This recommendation was acted upon through a clause in the 1876 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act stating, “...in the case of settlements being formed of immigrants in communities (such for instance as Mennonites or Icelanders) the Minister of the Interior may vary or waive, in his discretion, the foregoing requirements as to residence and cultivation on each separate quarter section entered as a homestead.”⁸⁶ In 1883, the status of village settlements with respect to homestead regulations was further clarified through a provision of the consolidated Dominion Lands Act that became known as the “Hamlet Clause.”

In case a certain number of homestead settlers embracing not less than twenty families, with a view to greater convenience in the establishment of schools and churches, and to the attainment of social advantages of life character, ask to be allowed to settle together in a hamlet or village, the Minister of the Interior may, in his discretion, vary or dispense with the foregoing requirements as to residence, but not as to the cultivation of each separate quarter section entered as a homestead.⁸⁷

Prime Minister John A. Macdonald did not prefer this method of settlement, but considered it necessary to meet the special demands of some settlers. "It is not the desire of the Government to encourage settlement in hamlets, by which people lose half their time going to and from their farms, but this clause is necessary to meet the habits of some of the European settlements, as for instance, the Mennonites."⁸⁸ However, on the whole this exception did not obviate the general rule that homesteads had to be registered to an

⁸⁵ “Annual Report of the Surveyor General (J.S. Dennis)” in Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1876, volume 7, No. 9, p. 5; LAC, RG 15, D II 1, volume 235, file 5088, J.S. Dennis to the Minister of the Interior, 1 November 1875.

⁸⁶ *Statutes of Canada*, 1876, 39 Vic. c.19 s.9.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1883, 46 Vic. c. 17 s. 32

⁸⁸ Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons of Canada*, 1883, p. 880.

individual. Over time Mennonite villages broke down as individuals decided to leave the voluntary communal system and become the sole proprietors of the farms registered in their names.⁸⁹

In the Icelandic reserve this occurred almost immediately after their arrival. Contrary to the assumptions of Surveyor General Dennis and others, neither Taylor nor the Icelanders intended that reserve lands be held or worked communally. While it was often the case that one or two families initially pooled resources and neighbours assisted one another with major tasks, individual ownership appears to have been the goal from the very beginning. According to colonist Símon Símonarson, there was a scramble for both village lots and homesteads, with the people who were “on the most intimate terms with Taylor” getting choice lands along the waterfront.⁹⁰ In January 1876 Taylor reported to the Minister of Agriculture, “Forty [village] lots have been sold at \$5 plot, a reserved lot being attached to each lot sold. A similar number of houses have been erected, and a village store is in active operation.”⁹¹ Many colonists also built houses on their homestead claims and moved out of the village once spring arrived.

The issue in New Iceland was not the willingness of the Icelanders to adapt to the individualistic homestead system, but rather the slowness of the Department of the Interior to fulfill the two preconditions necessary for the system to function: the rectilinear survey and the central registration of lands. Colonization in the Icelandic reserve occurred either prior to the survey, or while it was in progress. When the first

⁸⁹ Richard J. Friesen, "Saskatchewan Mennonite Settlements: The Modification of an Old World Settlement Pattern," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 9, no. 2 (1977): 74-75.

⁹⁰ University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections [hereafter UMASC], Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04).

⁹¹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 149 docket 15525, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 1 January 1876.

contingent of Icelandic colonists arrived in October 1875, only the southernmost township in the reserve had been surveyed.⁹² George McPhillips partially surveyed Gimli and the surrounding township in November 1875, but major survey work was not resumed until late August 1876. McPhillips surveyed Townships 19, 20, 21 and 22 Range 4 East as well as the town sites for Lundi (Icelandic River/Riverton) and Sandy Bar.⁹³ A second surveying crew under the direction of Joseph Doupe laid out the section lines in advance of McPhillips, and surveyed Township 23. A third survey and construction crew under the direction of Walter Beatty was engaged in building a colonization road from the Red River to Gimli, and later north to Icelander's River. By the spring of 1877 the surveys for the townships closest to the lakeshore were complete, but Big Island remained unsurveyed. John Taylor and the Big Island settlers sent several letters and petitions to Ottawa to have the island surveyed but without success.⁹⁴ Surveyor General Dennis refused these requests on the grounds that the land was of poor quality and because the other surveys in the reserve had proved to be overly expensive. He suggested that until the government was prepared to complete the survey, the settlers should subdivide the land themselves into water front lots measuring ten chains (approximately twenty metres) in width.⁹⁵ The settlers bickered amongst themselves over

⁹² AM, GR 1601, Surveyor's Field Book, no. 336.

⁹³ AM, GR 1601, Surveyors' Field Books, nos. 651, 662, 663, 664.

⁹⁴ LAC, RG 17, A I 1 volume 181 docket 18754, Taylor to Lowe, 8 February 1877.

⁹⁵ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 219, docket 22512, J.S. Dennis to Lowe, 25 March 1878.

how best to do this, but it ultimately was done.⁹⁶ This pattern of settlement was later confirmed when the survey was completed in 1883.⁹⁷

The geographical setting, absence of a comprehensive survey ahead of settlement, and the cultural traditions of the immigrants resulted in the development of a distinctive set of spatial practices in the reserve. In the first instance, this meant that in choosing lands the only “government” authority the colonists had to deal with was Taylor, who does not seem to have had full control over the situation. In July 1876, Taylor informed John Lowe, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, “...the people are squatting at random on the accessible localities.”⁹⁸ In general, accessible localities meant along lakeshore and along the banks of the colony’s rivers and creeks. In a place where there were many swamps and few roads, residing next to the water allowed for easier travel and transportation of goods. Símon Símonarson, who was not fortunate enough to be situated on the lake, noted that owners of lakefront homesteads were spared the inconvenience of carrying “...all their necessities some distance inland, and over muddy and difficult trails.”⁹⁹ Once the surveyors arrived, they confirmed this pattern by laying out river lots along Icelandier’s river, and long lakefront lots on the eastern coast of Big Island and at some points along the mainland lakeshore. In this sense, the Icelandic reserve represented a northward extension of the old river-lot system of the Red River settlement, which was permitted under the Dominion Lands survey system until 1884.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ For the protracted internal debate about the surveying of Big Island in *Framfari*, 13 March 1878, p. 146.

⁹⁷ AM, GR 1601, Surveyors’ Field Books, nos. 4250, 4251.

⁹⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Taylor to Lowe, 19 July 1876.

⁹⁹ UMASC, Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04).

¹⁰⁰ Morton and Martin, *History of Prairie Settlement/ "Dominion Lands" Policy*, 234.

Without the survey grid, the traditional Icelandic practice of naming farms took on a practical significance. From one end of the reserve to the other, colonists named their homesteads after local topographical features, places in Iceland, or even themselves. For example, Jón Jónsson from Múnkaþverá in northern Iceland homesteaded the farm *Akur* (Field) in *Víðirnesbyggð* (Willow Point settlement) south of Gimli. In the local context, he might be known as “Jón á Akri” to differentiate him from the many other settlers with the same name. Correspondents outside the reserve could address letters to the farm and the particular settlement where it was located and be certain that the Gimli Post Office would direct it to the appropriate person. Sometimes these Icelandic names became officially recognized geographical designations, as in the case of *Húsavík* (House Cove). But more often they existed alongside official names and the conventional Section, Township, and Range descriptions of the Dominion Lands system as an internal geographical code that helped situate and connect people and places within the reserve.¹⁰¹

The absence of a survey prior to settlement left homesteaders uncertain over whether the official boundaries would coincide with the ones they had created. In February 1877 Sigtryggur Jónasson informed John Lowe that “...quite a number of disputes [have] arisen amongst those who settled on unsurveyed lands, more than one being found to be on the same quarter section.”¹⁰² Shortly thereafter the colony council passed a resolution stating that it was “...absolutely necessary that some arrangements are made as soon as possible to have the settlers legally entered for their lots.” John

¹⁰¹ For more on Icelandic naming practices, see Haraldur Bessason, “A Few Specimens of North American-Icelandic,” *Scandinavian Studies* 39, no. 2 (1967): 115-46. Nelson Gerrard’s unpublished manuscript *Örnefni í Nýja Íslandi* (1975) contains a detailed listing of all the farm names in New Iceland.

¹⁰² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 178 docket 18408, Jónasson to Lowe, 9 February 1877.

Taylor asked the government for instructions on how this might be done, and an informal arrangement was made whereby Taylor was instructed to act as a “quasi Dominion land Agent” to “make a record of the entries of the Icelanders on their homesteads.”¹⁰³

Unfortunately, the entries made by Taylor in his own books were never transferred to the Lands Office, which resulted in Icelandic homestead claims in the reserve being mired in uncertainty for a decade.

The Icelanders were keen to familiarize themselves with the Dominion Lands system. In March 1877, the colony council requested that the government publish extracts of the Dominion Lands Act and other laws that concerned the colonists in the Icelandic language. The leadership group eventually did this themselves by publishing relevant sections of the Dominion Lands Act in the colony’s newspaper *Framfari*.¹⁰⁴ The colonists appear to have been quick studies of the system; a sketch of Víðirnesbyggð that Benedikt Arason sent to a friend in Iceland in January 1879 demonstrates his clear understanding of the Dominion Lands system and its relationship to the local topography. Benedikt’s map accurately depicts the physical features of the lakeshore, their relationship to the township and section lines, and includes many of the Icelandic farm names along with the names of their occupants (See figure 2.4).¹⁰⁵ Colonists such as Benedikt closely followed the periodic changes to the land regulations made by the Dominion government, and worked to ensure that their individual and collective rights to the land—as they understood them—were not impinged upon.

¹⁰³ LAC, RG 17, A I 2, reel T-119, volume 1534, p. 191, Lowe to Burgess, 22 May 1882.

¹⁰⁴ *Framfari*, 14 & 28 January 1878, pp. 73-74, 83-84.

¹⁰⁵ Böðvar Guðmundsson, *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga*, vol. I (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2001), 316.

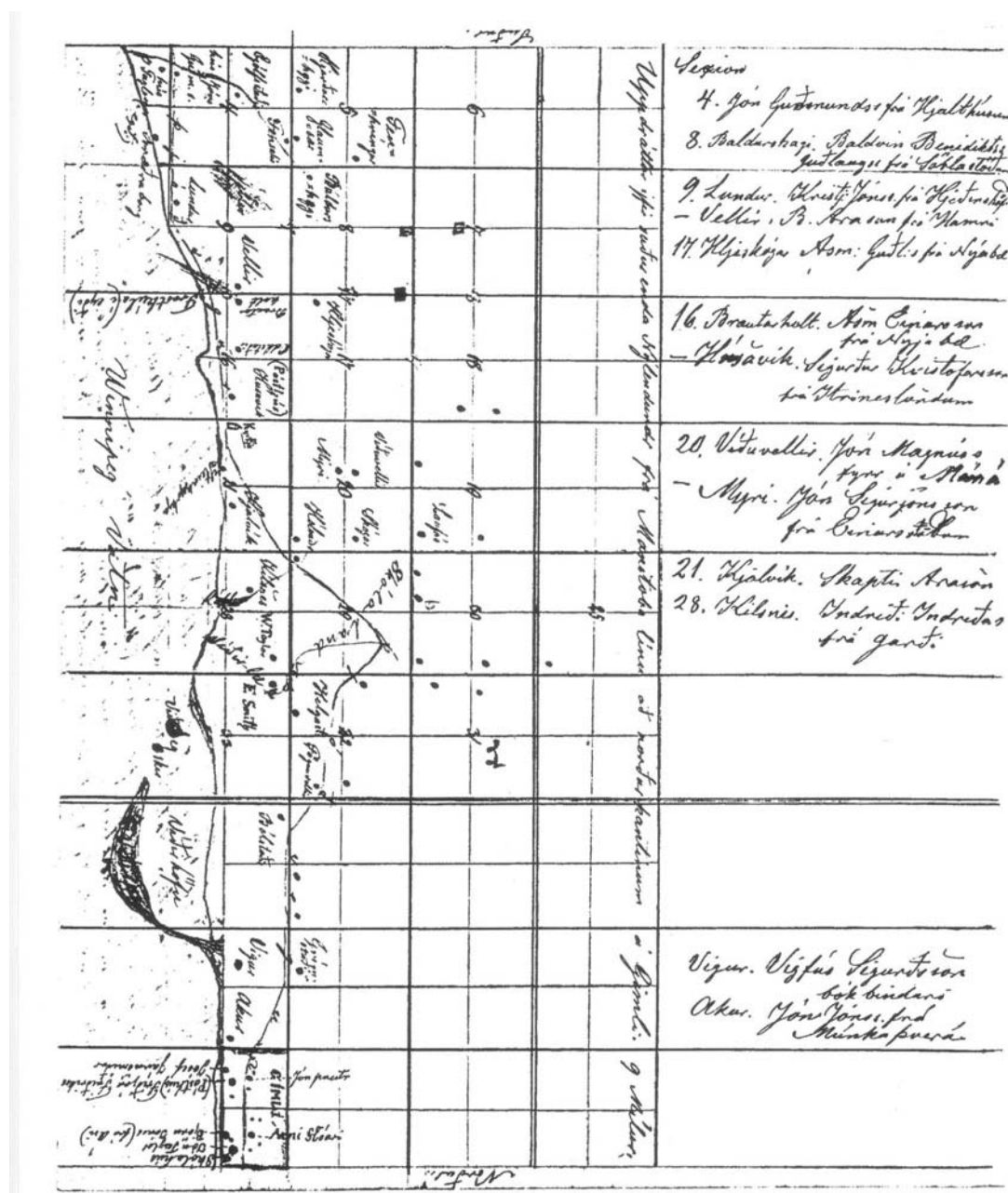


Figure 2.4. Benedikt Arason's map of Víðirnesbyggð, January 1879. Source: Landsbókasafn Íslands.

The most contentious issue that arose between the government and the Icelanders was the status of odd numbered sections within the reserve. In June 1879 the Macdonald government passed an Order-in-Council reserving all odd numbered sections from

homestead or pre-emption. These lands were instead to be sold by the government to finance the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the price being determined by their distance from the line. By this time the projected route of railway had been changed from the original northern route, which had passed through the Interlake region within a few miles of the Icelandic reserve, to a new route extending straight west south of the lakes. New Iceland was now between forty and 110 miles from the railway and prices for odd-numbered sections were accordingly set at the low-end of \$3.50 per acre for the southern townships and \$1 per acre for the more northerly ones.¹⁰⁶ The Icelanders, however, were already settled on many of the odd-numbered sections. After news of the changes was published in *Framfari*, including an opinion from an official in the Winnipeg Land Office that there would be no exemption for the Icelandic reserve, the colonists became deeply concerned over the status of their homestead claims. The editor stated that the colonists were divided into three camps: those so incensed with what they perceived as the government's arbitrary alteration of the rules that they planned to leave the colony, those wishing to stay and "hold onto the colony as firmly as possible" and those adopting a wait-and-see approach. At a meeting held on 8 November 1879, Friðjón Friðriksson informed the colony council that he had received assurances from the Land Agent at Winnipeg that the rights of the Icelanders to already settled odd numbered sections within the reserve would be respected, regardless of whether they were on even or odd numbered sections. Still many were also concerned with how the new rules would affect future Icelandic immigrants.¹⁰⁷ The widespread out-migration that followed in the

¹⁰⁶ Richtik, "The Policy Framework," 624-25.

¹⁰⁷ *Framfari*, [? August], 23 September, and 14 October 1879, 30 January 1880, pp. 648, 670-672, 690-691, 735.

wake of flooding in 1880-81 caused the matter to be left in abeyance. It resurfaced in 1883-84 when the remaining settlers attempted to secure their homestead patents and as newly arrived Icelandic migrants resettled vacated farms. In both cases the Dominion Lands Office in Winnipeg rejected claims to odd numbered sections, but the Icelanders persisted in settling them.

In 1885 the colonists sent a petition to Ottawa requesting that the odd-numbered sections in the reserve be made available for homestead and preemption. They argued that when the reserve was granted to them, it was understood that only the Hudson's Bay and school sections were to be withheld from settlement. Reserving the odd-numbered sections was therefore in violation of the original agreement they had made with the government in 1875. In responding to the petition, Deputy Minister of the Interior A.M. Burgess contended that the government had not broken faith with the Icelanders because "...the arrangement made in 1875 could not be supposed to last forever...." He nonetheless recommended to cabinet that the petitioners request be granted for a period of two years, since no one but Icelanders had expressed interest in the lands in question. An Order-in-Council to this effect was passed in May 1885, and the privileges contained in it were renewed by subsequent orders over the next twelve years.¹⁰⁸ This did not always happen automatically; it sometimes required prodding from the colonists and their representatives. In 1893, Icelandic Agent Baldwin L. Baldwinson returned again to the 1875 agreement to plead the case of an Icelander whose homestead application to an odd-numbered section had been rejected. "The very word 'Reserve' indicates and it was at that time understood that the reserve as originally granted should continue to be a reserve

¹⁰⁸ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, PC 1885-1103, PC 1887-1072, PC 1888-2150, PC 1889-0007, PC 1896-4314.

for these people. I claim therefore that the Government has no moral right to now withhold that which their predecessors granted to those people some 20 years [ago], and the undisputed right to which they have held ever since.”¹⁰⁹

In spite of this vigorous defense of the sanctity of the reserve, on other occasions Baldwinson argued that exclusivity was not in the interests of his people. In 1884 he and two other leading Winnipeg Icelanders sent a letter to the government asking that assistance for Icelandic colonization be continued and offering their suggestions about why New Iceland had failed to achieve notable progress. They argued that exclusion had been detrimental to the colony and recommended that in the future “no Icelandic colonies should hereafter be closed, and thus excluded from the English element whose knowledge and practical experience is invaluable to the Icelandic settler.”¹¹⁰

In general, the Icelandic colonists accepted the Dominion Lands system as the mechanism through which they could acquire land and develop the resources of the Northwest for their individual and collective benefit. The question was whether an exclusive colonization reserve helped or hindered them in that goal. Proponents of opening the reserve to other white settlers considered the debate to be a struggle to overcome some of the inherited legacies of their national culture, and envisioned forging a “New Icelander” infused with the spirit of liberal progress. In 1881, Friðjón Friðriksson, who had earlier been one of the champions of the idea of an exclusive colony, told Rev. Jón Bjarnason, “Icelandic bigotry and conceit is fading away and stupidity, narrow-mindedness, superstition, and conservatism is disappearing but

¹⁰⁹ Baldwin L. Baldwinson to H.H. Smith, 11 December 1893 in LAC, RG 15, D II 1, reel T-1443, volume 698, file 344410.

¹¹⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 425, docket 46378, B.L. Baldwinson, F.B. Anderson, and Jon Julius to John Lowe, 16 December 1884.

common sense and liberalism—both in worldly and spiritual matters—is gaining ground.”¹¹¹

¹¹¹ AM, New Iceland collection, MG 8, A 6 7, Friðjón Friðriksson to Jón Bjarnason, 11 August 1881.

Chapter 3

The First New Icelanders: Family Migration and the Formation of a Reserve Community

On 21 October 1875, Icelandic Agent John Taylor wrote a hurried letter to Department of Agriculture Secretary John Lowe announcing the safe arrival of the first party of Icelandic colonists in their reserve. Taylor noted that while there were a few cases of sickness there had been no deaths, and that the group's numbers had been augmented the previous night by the birth of a male child, "our first native born citizen."¹ This party of approximately 250 people was composed primarily of families with young children. For the next several years, their fate, both as individuals and as a collectivity, was bound up with the success or failure of this experiment in colonization. The outcome for many was ultimately disappointing; hardship, personal tragedy, slow material progress, and internal dissension convinced the majority of the first settlers that there was no future in New Iceland. Within the first two years upward of thirty had died of scurvy, smallpox and other diseases. In 1878 and 1879, more than 50 per cent of the original settlers left for Winnipeg and the Dakota Territory. Most of the remainder joined the exodus in 1880 and 1881 when the floodwaters of Lake Winnipeg destroyed hay crops, washed out roads, and swept away fences and buildings. In 1897, when New Iceland's reserve status was rescinded, only twelve members of the original group still resided in what had by that time become a stable, although not extremely prosperous, rural community. The rest were scattered across the Canadian west and northern United

¹ Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17 [hereafter RG 17], "General Correspondence" series [hereafter A-I-1], volume 144, docket 15091, Taylor to Lowe, 21 October 1875.

States, many in predominantly Icelandic settlements that they had helped found after leaving the Icelandic reserve.

In the fall of 1875 the first colonists were hopeful about their future in New Iceland. A month after arrival, one of them wrote to a Canadian friend in Parry Sound, Ontario, expressing his cautious optimism: “There seems to be good prospects before us if only we can get through the winter. The land seems to be very excellent, and if we can get in plenty of seed in the spring besides what we make fishing, we will be sure to succeed. Our people are all in good spirits...”² The Dominion authorities also seemed pleased. The Report of the Immigration and Colonization Committee stated, “The site chosen appears to be favourable for Icelandic settlement, and the Committee are of the opinion that colonization of this nature should be encouraged.”³ Given that the project had only just begun, this opinion was based more on perception rather than actual evidence. To the members of the committee, the Icelanders represented an idealized type of colonist—northern Europeans whose racial characteristics made them well suited to life in the Northwest. The method of colonization—group settlement of families in compact colonies—was also then at the height of fashion. It seemed to offer the best prospects for building up an orderly and prosperous white settler society in the Northwest organized around the liberal principles of private property rights and market oriented production. Politicians and civil servants in Ottawa had little direct knowledge of Iceland or Icelanders. Most of what they did know was derived from the travelogues of Lord Dufferin, Richard Burton and others. The backgrounds, motivations, hopes, and dreams

² Anonymous letter dated Gimli, 20 November 1875, reprinted in *Daily Free Press*, 17 January 1876.

³ Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 3rd sess. 3rd Parliament, 1876, p. 3.

of the people who made up the first group would have been entirely opaque to Canadian officials, save what the Icelanders' leaders had transmitted in petitions and reports to the Department of Agriculture.

This chapter looks in depth at the first group of Icelanders who came to the Northwest: who they were, where in Iceland they came from, and the sorts of knowledge and expertise they brought to the Northwest. It addresses several questions; why did they agree to be resettled in the Icelandic reserve? What sort of economy and society did they hope to build there? Did their ambitions correspond with or diverge from those of the Canadian government? These questions are answered here in two ways: first, through a demographic analysis of the composition of the first group drawn from census data and biographical information. Second, by considering what the immigrants' own life-writings—contemporary letters and diaries as well as retrospective memoirs—have to say about their experiences. The chapter locates the migrants within the social and economic structures of Iceland during the second half of the nineteenth century, and considers the circumstances that made emigration a possible and desirable option. It then looks at how they became involved with the Canadian state's attempts at immigrant group colonization, and examines how settlement patterns and household structure in the Icelandic reserve related to their backgrounds in Iceland.

The picture that emerges from these sources is of a group of people who shared two broad characteristics with other agricultural migrants to North America during 1870s and 80s. First, they exhibited the same tendency to cluster geographically with people of

the same background.⁴ The first New Icelanders were brought together by shared ties of language, culture, kinship and religion, common economic circumstances, and shared migration experiences. Many of the settlers were linked to one another through relatively large kin groups, or, if they were not close relations, at least came from the same districts in Iceland. The closer people were connected in these ways, the closer they clustered geographically in the Icelandic reserve. Second, their decisions about migration and resettlement were based not only on their present conditions and prospects in a given location, but also the need to establish a future for the next generation.⁵ The primary motivation in coming to New Iceland was to better the material circumstances of themselves and their kin, including those still in Iceland.

These similarities have not been explored in the historiography on New Iceland, which has instead been focused on the themes of isolation and cultural self-determination. Jónas Thor has argued that the Icelanders chose the colony site on Lake Winnipeg because it offered “the required isolation” to carry out their ambition of preserving their language and cultural traditions.⁶ Although many of the New Icelanders did aspire to establish a distinctive Icelandic ethnic community in North America, they did not consider geographical and cultural isolation to be a precondition for achieving that goal. In this respect, the New Icelanders were similar to the Mennonite reserve colonists of southeastern Manitoba; isolation has also been an important theme in their

⁴ Dirk Hoerder, "From Migrants to Ethnics: Acculturation in a Societal Framework," in *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives*, ed. Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 245.

⁵ See Bruce S. Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach*, 2nd ed. (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

⁶ Jónas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 80.

community's traditional historiography. Royden Loewen has disputed this emphasis, and argued that social boundaries, which "...defined the community and ordered external and internal relationships" were more important than geographical isolation in shaping transplanted Mennonite communities.⁷ The first New Icelanders envisioned a community that continued to use the Icelandic language and observe the religious and cultural traditions of the homeland, but which was also integrated with the larger social, economic and cultural structures of Anglo-Canadian settler society.

By combining multiple sources from both Iceland and Canada, it is possible to determine the names, ages, sexes, places of origin, migration patterns, and familial relationships for 260 of the 285 individuals⁸ who travelled to Winnipeg in September 1875. This migration was predominantly a movement of families with young children. As a result, the group was fairly evenly split between the sexes. Females accounted for 47 per cent of the known members of the first group, but many of the unknown individuals were probably girls and women who stayed in Winnipeg to work in domestic service. The true proportion of females was likely closer to 49 per cent, which was the same as the overall sex distribution for Icelandic migrants during the 1870s.⁹ There were at least fifty couples in the group, whose average age was 37.3 for males and 35.1 for females. All but six were married in Iceland; four were married in Ontario prior to the

⁷ Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 79.

⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 151, docket 15749, Hespeler to Lowe, 26 Oct 1875. John Taylor stated that "about thirty persons" stayed behind in Winnipeg for the winter, but from the available sources it is not possible to determine the names of most of these people. See LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 149 docket 15525, Taylor to Lowe, 1 Jan 1876.

⁹ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration," in *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe*, ed. P. C. Emmer and Magnus Mörner (New York: Berg, 1992), 113.

move and three couples were unmarried. Seven of the youngest couples arrived without any children, although at least three of the wives were pregnant. The remaining forty-three couples brought with them at least 114 children under the age of eighteen. There were five instances of blended families, and two cases in which couples brought foster children with them. Páll Bjarnason's first wife Ragnheiður Halldórsdóttir died in August 1874 while waiting to leave for Canada. Páll continued the journey with their five children, the family's domestic servant Sigríður Jónsdóttir and her daughter Gíslína Gísladóttir. Páll and Sigríður, who herself was a widow, had at least one child together and later married in New Iceland.¹⁰ The average number of children per couple was 2.2, and the largest families included five children. The majority of these children were young; only a quarter of the children were twelve or older, while 45 per cent were between six and eleven, and 30 per cent were five or less. At least five women arrived in Winnipeg with infants less than six months old, and upwards of nine women were more than six months pregnant when they landed at Willow Point on 21 October 1875. The presence of so many young children in the group was a serious challenge for the first colonists. On many of North America's colonial frontiers, family labour was crucial to establishing a farm on homestead lands, and the Icelandic reserve was no exception.¹¹ However, the fact that the majority of the children were too young to contribute to the

¹⁰ G.J. Oleson, "Gíslína Gísladóttir Olson," in *Almanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* 1952, 80-85.

¹¹ See Harriet Friedmann, "World Market, State, and Family Farm: Social Bases of Household Production in the Era of Wage Labor," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20, no. 4 (1978): 545-86; Gérard Bouchard, "Family Reproduction in New Rural Areas: Outline of a North American Model," *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (1994): 475-510; Kenneth Michael Sylvester, *The Limits of Rural Capitalism: Family, Culture, and Markets in Montcalm, Manitoba, 1870-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

household meant that most families were caught in the “life cycle squeeze,” when the need to care for small children stretched family resources.¹²

To some extent, the disadvantage of caring for a young family could be offset by the presence of other adult family members in the household. Many of the Icelandic reserves' young families were part of kin groups that also included older adults and younger unmarried persons. There were twenty-nine unmarried men and six unmarried women in the first group. The unmarried older adults were predominantly widows or widowers, frequently the parents or relatives of male or female family heads, while the younger people included many siblings of married settlers. Forty-three year old widow Helga Jónasdóttir arrived in New Iceland with her sons Jósef and Jónas Guðmundsson, aged nineteen and fifteen, and twenty-one year old daughter Elín, who was married to Sigurður Jósúa Björnsson. Sigurður's father, widower Björn Jósúason, and half-brother Björn Jósúa Björnsson were also part of the first group. Fifty-five-year-old widower Bjarni Sigurðsson headed another group. He arrived in the Icelandic reserve with his sons Samson and Friðrik, and daughter Sigurbjörg, their spouses and at least two grandchildren. With them came Bjarni's thirty-nine year old housekeeper Kristín Jóhannesdóttir, and her two teenage children Hjörtur Jóhannsson and Ingibjörg Jóhannesdóttir. These were exceptional examples within a common pattern of kinship migration; of the approximately 120 single or married adults in the first group of settlers, at least one in three had a sibling in the group, and several had multiple siblings.

¹² R. W. Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and Practices of Resettlement on Saltspring Island, 1859-1891* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 143-44.

In addition to in many cases being close blood relatives, New Iceland's first colonists had shared geographical origins in Iceland. Virtually all of them came from the northern districts of *Eyjafjarðarsýsla* (30%), *Húnavatnssýsla* (22%), North and South *Pingeyjarsýsla* (20%), and *Skagafjarðarsýsla* (16%). The rest came from the adjacent counties of *Dalasýsla* (6%) and *Strandasýsla* (2%) in the west and North and South *Múlasýsla* (4%) in the east (See figure 3.1).¹³ Most Icelandic emigrants during this period came from the north, but this trend was even more pronounced in the case of New Iceland. The same four northern districts that accounted for 72 per cent of Icelandic emigrants between 1873 and 1875 provided the Icelandic reserve with 88 per cent of its first settlers.¹⁴ In many cases, people were not only from the same district, but also the same commune (*hreppur*)—the smallest administrative unit in Iceland. For example, all of the New Iceland colonists from Dalasýsla came from *Miðdalahreppur*.

The colonists also had a shared migration experience. The majority had been recruited to come to Canada by the Ontario government in 1873 and 1874. In August 1873, 115 of the 153 Icelandic passengers of the *SS Manitoban* accepted an offer to settle in that province. In September 1874, the Allan Line and the Dominion and Ontario governments arranged for a special direct sailing from Iceland to Quebec. The household heads from among the 351 passengers aboard the *St. Patrick* pledged to settle in Ontario in return for subsidized ocean passage.¹⁵ The 1873 *Manitoban* contingent and the 1874

¹³ There was also one individual from the western county of Snæfellsnessýsla, but he was born and had grown up in Dalasýsla.

¹⁴ See Table 1 in Jónius Kristinsson, *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914: A Record of Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983).

¹⁵ LAC, “Department of Employment and Immigration” fonds, RG 76 [hereafter RG 76], C1, List Number 77, *SS St. Patrick*, 23 September 1874.



Figure 3.1. *Sýslur* divisions in Iceland during the emigration period. Map by Ryan Eyford. Source: Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 153.

St. Patrick group were settled on the southern fringes of the Canadian Shield where the Ontario government was encouraging the colonization of “free grant” lands. Most of the 1873 group was transported to Rosseau in the Muskoka district where they either claimed land or sought out employment in the region. Several who were dissatisfied with Ontario crossed the border and joined Icelanders settled in Wisconsin. The 1874 party was transported to Kinmount in Victoria County where the men were employed as navvies for

a railway then under construction.¹⁶ When the railway ran into financial difficulties and work was halted, many of the Icelanders moved away from Kinmount. Some claimed free grant land nearby, while others fanned out across the province in search of employment as labourers or domestic servants.¹⁷ About eighty people followed one of their countrymen to Nova Scotia, where the provincial government provided them with cleared land and houses at a colony site fifty miles northeast of Halifax.¹⁸ The majority of those who stayed at Kinmount and vicinity took up the Dominion government's offer of resettlement in the Northwest. They accounted for 143 of the 180 *St. Patrick* Icelanders that assembled at Toronto for the journey west in September 1875. The remainder of the group consisted of forty-four people from the *Manitoban* group and twenty-eight who had come to Ontario in smaller groups over the previous three years. Eight more Icelanders from Wisconsin joined the party at Duluth, Minnesota.¹⁹

Regardless of which district or commune they lived in prior to emigration or how closely related they were to one another, the first Icelandic reserve colonists had shared roots in the traditional agricultural society of rural Iceland. Upwards of 95 per cent of the settlers emigrated from farms. This could hardly have been otherwise, since Iceland was an overwhelmingly rural society during this period; in 1880, only about 5 percent of the

¹⁶ See Ryan C. Eyford, "Icelandic Migration to Canada, 1872-1875: New Perspectives on the 'Myth of Beginnings'" (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2003), 79-117.

¹⁷ Archives of Ontario [hereafter AO], Department of Immigration fonds, RG 11, 8 1, file 44476, Sigtryggur Jónasson to David Spence, 29 May 1875.

¹⁸ For more on the Nova Scotia settlement, see Thor, *Icelanders in North America*, 74-77.

¹⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 143, docket 15412, Taylor to Lowe, 18 December 1875. A total of thirteen people joined the party in Duluth. The other five were probably John Taylor's brother William and his family.

population lived in places with 300 or more inhabitants.²⁰ The few New Icelanders who had emigrated from an urban location came from the northern village of Akureyri. However, even these people had spent the majority of their lives in the countryside. Jónas Jónasson, the brother of Assistant Icelandic Agent Sigtryggur Jónasson, had only moved to Akureyri in 1871 at the age of twenty-one to apprentice as a printer. With the exception of one year working as a farm labourer, Jónas spent his childhood and adolescence with his parents on several farms in the vicinity of the village.²¹

The first colonists left one farming society to help build another in the Canadian Northwest. But in creating a “New Iceland” did they intend to transplant the familiar patterns of rural life from their homeland, or did they see the colony as an opportunity to build a *new* society based on the principles of nineteenth century liberalism? In order to answer this question it is necessary first to sketch out the broad contours of the society they left, their place within its social and economic hierarchies, and the complicated relationship between liberalism and Icelandic nationalism during the latter nineteenth century. The reasons for the Icelandic deputation’s choice of reserve location, and the decisions of individual colonists to participate in the project, can then be placed in context.

Farming in Iceland was synonymous with pastoral agriculture. Sheep, cattle, and horses were grazed whenever possible, and otherwise fed with hay cut from home fields. Except for a small but growing number of people who lived by the sea as cottars, fishing was a secondary activity conducted on a seasonal basis. There were two major categories

²⁰ Magnús S. Magnússon, *Iceland in Transition: Labour and Socio-Economic Change Before 1940* (Lund: Ekonomisk-historiska föreningen i Lund, 1985), 57.

²¹ Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985), 385.

of farms, independent farms (*heimajörð*) and outlying farms (*hjáleigur*). Outlying farms were typically marginal upland holdings that could sustain a household only during favorable climatic cycles. The countryside was thinly populated and farms were geographically dispersed.

The vast majority of Icelandic farmers were tenants or sub-tenants. In 1850, only 17 per cent of farmers were freeholders.²² Land ownership was concentrated in the hands of the Danish crown, the Lutheran church, and a few large proprietors. Under these circumstances, moveable goods and chattels, particularly livestock, formed the bulk of people's assets. Independent farms and one or more outlying farms were grouped together as a taxation unit called a legally assessed farm (*lögbyli*). Farms were valued according to the number of cattle that could be raised on them, and the tenant was obliged to pay the taxes due on the holding. A commune was composed of at least twenty legally assessed farms. Its two main functions were to organize the fall roundup of sheep from the highland pastures, and to coordinate poor relief. The latter function involved supporting paupers, typically but not exclusively children and the elderly, who were housed on farms within the commune.²³

As well as being the primary unit of production, reproduction, and consumption, the farm household was also the major social institution of the countryside. At its core was a nuclear family, headed by the farmer (*bóndi*) and his wife. In addition to the farm couple's children, it was not uncommon for households to include an elderly widowed parent as well as collateral relatives of the farming couple. The farmer and his wife

²² Guðmundur Jónsson, "Institutional Change in Icelandic Agriculture, 1780-1940," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 41, no. 2 (1993): 109.

²³ For more on local government in Iceland and how it shaped the development of municipal institutions in the Icelandic reserve, see Chapter 6.

exercised wide-ranging paternal authority over not only their own children and younger relatives, but also other members of the household who were not necessarily blood relations. This included a rotating pool of male and female servants (*vinnuhjú*). It could also include boarders (*lausamenn*) who worked on a seasonal basis, and paupers (*þurfamenn*) placed in the household by the commune. Lodgers (*húsmenn*) also worked on the farm and lived in the farmer's house, but were often married and had more independence than other members of the household. They usually had a few animals among the farmer's herd, and were allotted a share of the hayfield. According to the emigrant register *Vesturfaraskrá*, the Icelandic reserve's first settlers consisted of farmers or farmer's sons (52%), servants (26%), and lodgers or cottars (20%).²⁴ The proportion of servants was representative of the broader Icelandic population. In the second half of the nineteenth century servants accounted for at least a quarter of the total population and 35 to 40 per cent of people over fifteen years of age.²⁵

Each of these social distinctions could represent a different phase in a person's life cycle.²⁶ Children, both those of the farming couple and others in the household, received a rudimentary education at home that usually helped them attain at least basic literacy. Around age fifteen they left the parental household and went to work as servants on another farm. Time spent in service away from immediate family was considered to be an important part of a young person's education and socialization. The average age of

²⁴ The remaining 2 per cent consisted of skilled tradesmen, paupers, and people with no specified occupation.

²⁵ Jónsson, "Institutional Change," 103.

²⁶ Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland 1801-1930: Studies in the Relationship Between Demographic and Socio-Economic Development, Social Legislation and Family and Household Structures* (Uppsala/Stockholm: S. Academiae Ubsaliensis 1988), 63.

marriage was around thirty for men and slightly lower for women. After a period living as lodgers, the couple would form their own farming household. In old age, retired parents often lived with one of their children.

The first New Icelanders were broadly representative of these patterns in Icelandic rural society. Most of the children under fifteen had lived with their parents prior to emigration. The servants in the group were predominantly young adults around twenty-four years of age. Among those who had been married in Iceland, their average ages at first marriage were 27.2 for men and 25 for women. The farmers and lodgers in the group were typically about thirty-four years old. The average age of farm wives was 38 and for lodgers' wives was 32.2.

While movement between social categories was possible, family circumstances often limited an individual's possibilities. If a child's parents were unmarried, had died or were too poor, the communal authorities could place her in another household as a pauper. A woman who did not marry spent the majority of her life in service. If she did not have relatives to look after her, she was susceptible to becoming a pauper later in life. When no land was available for a couple to establish an independent farm household, they might spend a longer period in the intermediate social and economic position of lodger or cottar.

Internal migration was a common feature of life in nineteenth century rural Iceland. Since tenancy and service contracts were generally for a short-term—one or two years—farmers, lodgers, and servants moved on a fairly regular basis. Young couples looking to establish a household were often obliged to travel far from their home region

to gain access to land.²⁷ Approximately 35 per cent of adult male settlers in the Icelandic reserve emigrated from a different district than they were born in. Many who did emigrate from the same district where they had been born had moved around in the interim. Jakob Sigurðsson Eyfjörð was born in and emigrated from Eyjafjarðarsýsla, but had spent five years working in Norður Múlasýsla as a young adult.²⁸ Frequent moves within a district were also common; from their marriage in 1862 to emigration in 1874, New Iceland colonists Indriði Indriðason and his wife Sigurlaug Jóhannesdóttir moved three times within Þingeyjarsýsla.²⁹

The underpinning of traditional Icelandic rural society was a system of labour bondage. Unmarried persons were required by law to hire themselves out to farmers as servants for a term of one year. Servants were not legally prevented from marrying, but if they lacked the means to be self-sufficient they risked having their family broken up and their children dealt with as paupers by the communal authorities. Landowners required the permission of the commune to have lodgers or cottars settled on their land. The implications of this social system were twofold: first, it ensured that farmers had an adequate supply of relatively cheap labour. Second, it served as a system of social discipline and a check on population growth by delaying marriage or placing it out of the reach of many servants. Marriage and procreation were treated as privileges that were only endorsed by the broader community if the couple had attained the appropriate social position.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 61.

²⁸ *Heimskringla*, 15 February 1922.

²⁹ Nelson Gerrard, *Gimlunga Saga: A History of Gimli & the Víðirnes Settlement: Volume I* (Arborg, MB: Saga publications, forthcoming).

³⁰ Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*, 36.

In the second half of the nineteenth-century, demographic pressures, environmental conditions, and economic development undermined the stability of the traditional Icelandic social structure. In the first half of the century, warmer weather helped increase agricultural productivity. Favorable climatic conditions meant that farming on marginal lands became possible, which opened new opportunities for family and household formation. The Icelandic population grew from 47,230 in 1801 to 69,763 by 1870.³¹ By mid-century there was a large cohort of people approaching marriageable age. Between 1845 and 1860 the twenty-five to thirty four age group grew by 45 per cent, while the population as a whole grew by only 13 per cent.³² At the same time, the conditions that had permitted this population expansion receded. The agricultural economy underwent a series of shocks brought on by a cooler climate, which reduced the hay-growing season, and an epizootic that decimated the sheep population during the 1850s.³³ There were now more people pursuing fewer opportunities in the agricultural economy. Wages fell, unemployment rose, and the number of paupers swelled by 264% between 1851 and 1871. Less land was available for young people hoping to marry and form their own farming households, which resulted in division and subdivision of holdings and larger households; the mean household size grew from 6.7 in 1860 to 7.6 in 1870.³⁴ In these circumstances, many people began to look further afield with a view to improving the prospects for themselves and their children.

³¹ Guðmundur Jónsson and Magnús S. Magnússon, *Hagskinna: Sögulegar Hagtölur um Ísland/Icelandic Historical Statistics* (Reykjavík: Hagstofa Íslands, 1997), 49.

³² Jónsson, "Institutional Change," 103.

³³ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 277.

³⁴ Jónsson and Magnússon, *Hagskinna*, 140.

The traditional mobility of the Icelandic rural population found new outlets as Iceland's economy was slowly transformed by the development of the fishery, and with the greater integration of the country into the circuits of world trade. In 1855 mercantilist trade restrictions favouring Danish firms were replaced by a free trade regime. The fishery grew from a small seasonal activity conducted from rowboats to a large-scale industrial enterprise involving decked fishing vessels and gradually superseded agriculture as the main source of wealth in the Icelandic economy. The rural population responded to the new opportunities in the fishing industry by moving into coastal villages. Gunnar Karlsson estimates that more than 14,000 people moved to the villages between 1870 and 1914, which was roughly equivalent to the number of people who migrated to North America during the same period.³⁵ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson argues that levels of overseas emigration were lower in parts of the country that were closer to fishing regions and urban centres.³⁶

Growth in the livestock trade with Great Britain during the 1870s was essential to the development of a mass emigration movement in Iceland. It allowed prospective emigrants to convert their primary asset—their livestock—into cash that could be used to finance their migration and resettlement in North America. Other factors included an increase in information about overseas destinations, and the integration of Iceland into the networks of transatlantic migrant transport. In 1860 a prominent farmer in

³⁵ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 239-42.

³⁶ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "The Onset of Emigration from Iceland," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 9, no. 1 (1977): 87-93; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "Emigrant Fares and Emigration from Iceland to North America, 1874-1893," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 28, no. 1 (1980): 53-71; Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration."; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and Steinþór Heiðarsson, *Framtíð handan hafis: Vesturfarir frá Íslandi, 1870-1914* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003).

Píngeyjarsýsla recommended Brazil as the best possible destination for prospective Icelandic migrants. A few sojourners made the long trip and sent back encouraging reports that prompted 550 people to sign up to join them in 1873. Problems arranging transportation for such a large group prevented all but a handful of these people from following through with their intentions. Many decided to join other prospective emigrants who intended to go to Wisconsin. A small number of young Icelanders had gone after 1870. Letters from these people were published in the newspaper *Norðanfari* that drew people's attention to opportunities in the Midwestern United States. During the winter and spring of 1872-73, meetings were held in the northern port of Akureyri to make plan for a large migration to North America. They enlisted the help of Reykjavík merchant Guðmundur Lambertsen, shipping agent for the Scottish-Canadian Allan Line.³⁷ The Allans contacted Canadian immigration authorities in hopes that they would offer subsidies help boost this new source of transatlantic passengers.³⁸ Dominion officials took up this offer, ushering in a system of Canadian state intervention in the Icelandic emigrant market that would persist until the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁹ As the emigration movement expanded into a general exodus during the 1880s and 90s, Icelandic nationalists accused emigrants of abandoning the nation at precisely the time when it was struggling to gain greater autonomy from Denmark. Emigrant leaders countered that misrule and backwardness in the homeland was a large part of the

³⁷ *Norðanfari*, 19 April and 28 May 1873.

³⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 84, docket 8168, William Dixon to John Lowe, 26 April 1873.

³⁹ See Chapter 1.

reason why they had left. They argued that North America presented new opportunities to expand the economic and cultural horizons of the Icelandic nation.⁴⁰

The anxiety over emigration reflected broader concerns about the effects of Iceland's social and economic transformation on national character. Many farmers and government officials considered the traditional structures of rural society to be not only the stable core of the economy, but also the moral centre of national life. Through their representatives in the Icelandic Parliament, farmers attempted to shore up the crumbling social system through increasingly restrictive legislation that aimed to constrain labour mobility and limit the fertility of servants and paupers by placing formal restrictions on marriage rights. Guðmundur Hálfðánarson has argued these efforts were symptomatic of a deeply conservative streak in nineteenth century Icelandic nationalism. While the nationalist movement has traditionally been associated with a group of liberal intellectuals, many nationalists wanted greater freedom from metropolitan control not to implement liberal reforms, but to curtail individual freedom and protect the old regime from the influences of continental liberalism. As a cultural construction, the Icelandic nation included all people who spoke the Icelandic language and were united by shared history and literary traditions. But as a political project membership in the nation was far more circumscribed and hierarchical; political rights were dependent on social distinctions.⁴¹

This raises several questions about the first settlers of New Iceland. Were they attempting to transplant a vanishing way of life in the Canadian Northwest or did they

⁴⁰ Kjartansson, "Icelandic Emigration," 107.

⁴¹ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, "Social Distinctions and National Unity: On Politics of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Iceland," *History of European Ideas* 21, no. 6 (1995): 774.

want to leave the old structures of Icelandic rural society behind and build a “New Iceland” in economic and social terms as well as in name? How did their conception of themselves as a distinct linguistic and cultural community in North America relate to their economic goals? Was physical separation from the broader settler society an important consideration in their choice of colony site and their decision to migrate to the Northwest? These questions are important, because while cultural concerns have been presented as the central factor shaping the creation of New Iceland, the goals, ambitions and economic strategies of individuals involved in the project have remained largely opaque.⁴²

It is clear that many of the migrants shared a desire to settle in a homogeneous rural community alongside fellow Icelanders. This was expressed in the meeting at Kinmount on 31 May 1875 that endorsed the Canadian government’s proposal of sending a delegation to Manitoba:

...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 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 can't be done without them uniting and forming a settlement by themselves.⁴³

This resolution was in keeping with the general outpouring of nationalist sentiment that accompanied the millennial anniversary of Iceland’s settlement in 1874. It also echoed the rhetoric of the charismatic editor and poet Jón Ólafsson, the architect of the ambitious

⁴² See Thor, *Icelanders in North America*, 78-94.

⁴³ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 315, docket 14103, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 June 1875.

scheme to resettle the entire population of Iceland in Alaska.⁴⁴ While Ólafsson had nothing to do with the Canadian Icelandic reserve project, the secretary of the Kinmount meeting, twenty-four year old Friðjón Friðriksson, had been one of the signatories to Ólafsson's petition to the U.S. government.⁴⁵ Friðriksson believed that while the location at Kinmount could probably support a colony, it could not meet the needs of a shared colony for all Icelandic emigrants. "The amount of land is insufficient, and we would probably mix with the locals too much to be able to maintain into the future those useful aspects of our nationality—our language and religion."⁴⁶ Friðriksson did not elaborate on which national characteristics he thought were dispensable, but on other occasions he criticized his fellow immigrants for clinging to the past or hoping for the future instead of seizing present opportunities.⁴⁷

The chairman of the meeting at Kinmount, Sigtryggur Jónasson, had never been a supporter of Ólafsson's plan. He considered it to be impractical and believed that in Alaska the Icelanders would be just as isolated from modern civilization as they had been in their homeland.⁴⁸ The Kinmount meeting selected Sigtryggur and Einar Jónasson as delegates to examine land in Manitoba along with Baptist missionary John Taylor.⁴⁹ While Sigtryggur was the established leader of the Kinmount Icelanders, Einar was likely

⁴⁴ See Jón Ólafsson, *Alaska: Lýsing á landi og lands-kostum, ásamt skýrslu innar íslenzku sendinefndar: um stofnun íslenzkrar nýlendu* (Washington: [s.n.], 1875); Hjörtur Pálsson, *Alaskaför Jóns Ólafssonar 1874* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1975).

⁴⁵ Thorstina Walters, *Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America* (Fargo, ND: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953), 213.

⁴⁶ University of Manitoba Icelandic Collection [hereafter UMIC], Friðjón Friðriksson to Jón Bjarnason, 15 June 1875. My translation.

⁴⁷ UMIC, Friðjón Friðriksson to Jón Bjarnason, 26 July 1875.

⁴⁸ *Norðanfari*, 29 April 1875.

⁴⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 315, docket 14103, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 June 1875.

chosen in part to make the delegation reflect the regional distribution of the settlers; the former was from Eyjafjarðarsýsla while the latter was from Dalasýsla. Kinmount settlers Kristján Jónsson, Skafti Arason also joined what Taylor called the ‘Icelandic Deputation.’ A sixth member, Sigurður Kristófersson, joined the party in Milwaukee. These three men were from the Þingeyjarsýsla region. Except for the sixty-two year-old missionary Taylor, all the members of the Icelandic Deputation were unmarried and in their early to mid-twenties.

As was shown in the previous chapter, the Icelandic Deputation’s choice of lands was limited by existing settlements, and by the various tracts of land reserved for other purposes. They were also constrained by their mandate to find a site large enough to accommodate not only the current group of Icelandic immigrants, but also those expected to arrive in the coming years, and the practical need to match a potential location with the skills and material resources of their countrymen. Skapti Arason later recalled that they did not want to go too far west, since the Icelanders lacked the capital to buy animals and farm equipment and were unfamiliar with agricultural methods of the region.⁵⁰ There were in fact few European agricultural settlements on the prairies at the time. With no railways and few roads, the need for ready access to fuel and transportation, and the perception that the prairies were less fertile than land covered in timber, kept settlement largely confined to partly wooded tracts in close proximity to waterways.⁵¹ The damage done to farms in the Red River valley by swarms of grasshoppers in recent years was also apparent to the Icelandic Deputation. Finding a colony site where the pests did not seem

⁵⁰ Thorleifur Jóakimsson Jackson, *Frá Austri til Vesturs: Framhald af Landnámssögu Nýja-Íslands* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1921), 72.

⁵¹ See James M. Richtik, "Mapping the Quality of Land for Agriculture in Western Canada," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1985): 55-61.

to be as troublesome was also part of their deliberations. Dominion Lands Agent Donald Codd directed them to the west shore of Lake Winnipeg as the location most likely to meet their requirements.⁵²

The Icelandic Deputation emphasized economic considerations in its choice of colony site. Apart from noting that it had been tasked with finding a site for a “United Icelandic Colony” the cultural goal of preserving language and religion mentioned in the meeting at Kinmount is completely absent from the Deputation’s final report. The report, which was later published in the Canadian government immigration pamphlet *Nýa* [sic] *Ísland í Kanada* (1875), contains a careful consideration of the resources and future prospects of the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg as they appeared in the summer of 1875. The presence of marshes and fields where hay for livestock could be obtained, and abundant timber for building and fuel were important considerations. The Icelanders described the soil as a “rich black mould over a white clay” and asserted that “the land is excellent for raising grain, and that it is better than the very best land we have seen in Ontario.”⁵³ Their claims about the soil’s character were supported by the observable success of Aboriginal agriculture in the region.

...we did see with our own eyes good potatoes which the Indians had planted in June, and also what is termed Red river corn, both growing at Icelanders’ [White Mud] river. And at the south end of the Lake Winnipeg, good wheat, potatoes, oats, peas and barley, as well as Red River corn just mentioned were all cultivated with success, the grasshoppers not yet having extended so far to the north as that.⁵⁴

⁵² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14644, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 11 August 1875.

⁵³ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

⁵⁴ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

The Aboriginal fishery was also cited as evidence of another resource that could be developed by the Icelandic colonists. They focused in particular on whitefish, which they believed “would no doubt become a valuable article of commerce.”⁵⁵ The reasons for their choice of colony site were summarized in a way that linked the benefit of the local environment and its resources with access to markets. Proximity to the proposed line of the Canadian Pacific Railway was of particular importance.

[The colony site] lies on a Lake which abounds with fish. The people can go there the whole distance from Ontario and Quebec by railway and steamboats. Easy transportation along the coast by boats in the summer, and on the ice in the winter. The south east end of the reserve is only about twenty eight miles by water from the point where the Canadian Pacific Railway is to cross the Red River, and farther west it is not so far as that...There are now about three hundred men employed on the work of this road, about six miles east of Red River. And it is possible that the road will in two years be completed from this point to the head of Lake Superior. There is plenty of wood on the reserve, both for building purposes and fuel, yet...it is easy to clear the land, as the Poplar trees are not heavy, and their roots run near the surface of the ground, so that the stumps can be taken out and the land plowed in two years after they are cut. There is abundance of hay to be had at once.⁵⁶

The Deputation had no trouble securing this tract of land as a reserve. The Department of the Interior approved the request immediately, and Minister David Laird later instructed Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris that in his treaty negotiations with the Lake Winnipeg Indians, the land claim of the Icelanders was to take precedence.⁵⁷ Taylor and Sigtryggur Jónasson returned east to inform the Icelanders in Wisconsin and Ontario of the results of their mission. Meetings were held in Milwaukee on 15 August and at Kinmount and Gravenhurst Ontario a few days later. The report of the delegation was

⁵⁵ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

⁵⁶ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

⁵⁷ LAC, David Laird fonds, MG 27, 1D10, Laird to Morris, 15 September 1875.

favourably received at all three meetings, and resolutions were passed asking the Canadian government for financial aid to allow them to move west that fall.⁵⁸ On 13 September the Dominion government passed an Order-in-Council allotting \$5,000 to remove “200 adult Icelandic immigrants” from Ontario and resettle them in the reserve on Lake Winnipeg.⁵⁹ Seven days later more than 250 Icelandic families had gathered at Toronto in preparation for the journey west.

In spite of the enthusiasm expressed at Wisconsin and Ontario meetings and the government’s offer of subsidized transport, New Iceland turned out to be a relatively weak magnet for Icelandic migrants in North America. The first New Iceland party was the single largest concentration of Icelanders on the continent, but they represented just 33 per cent of emigration since 1870.⁶⁰ There were several hundred Icelanders in Wisconsin, but only eight of them joined the trek west in the fall of 1875, perhaps due to the fact that the requested support from the Canadian government was not forthcoming.⁶¹ Even people who took a leading role in the meetings in Ontario did not go. This included Albert Gíslason, who made the motion endorsing the Icelandic Deputation’s

⁵⁸ Minutes of the annual meeting of Icelanders society in America, Milwaukee, 15 August 1875 and Minutes of a meeting of the Icelanders held at Gravenhurst Ontario, 19 August 1875, included in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14679, Taylor to Lowe, 3 September 1875.

⁵⁹ LAC, Privy Council Office fonds, RG 2 [hereafter RG 2], Orders-in-Council series [hereafter A 1 a], volume 337, reel C-3313, PC 1875-0889, 13 September 1875.

⁶⁰ According to *Vesturfaraskrá* there were 813 emigrants between 1870 and 1875. Of the 270 people known to have been part of the first group, at least seven were infants born in North America.

⁶¹ This may have reflected a lack of means rather than a lack of enthusiasm for the project. On 15 August 1875 the “Icelanders’ Society in America” held a meeting in Milwaukee at which they endorsed the Icelandic deputation’s report and requested that the Canadian government provide subsidized transport from Milwaukee to Winnipeg. This support did not materialize. See Minutes of the annual meeting of Icelanders society in America, Milwaukee, 15 August 1875, included in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, docket 14678, Taylor to Lowe, 3 September 1875.

mission to Manitoba.⁶² He apparently wasn't pleased with its results, since he and his family instead moved to Milwaukee where they settled permanently.⁶³ Sigurður Jóhannesson, chairman of the meeting at Gravenhurst and member of the committee selected to draw up a plan for the migration west, chose to go to Nova Scotia.⁶⁴ Some who eventually did go were at first hesitant. Jakob Sigurðsson Eyfjörð, who was settled in Parry Sound, Ontario, didn't believe it was possible to travel west that fall. He thought he would eventually go to New Iceland, but worried that he would not be able to sell the house that he had built at a cost of \$400, and would therefore have little money with which to commence farming.⁶⁵

The majority of Icelandic immigrants remained fairly widely dispersed throughout North America. They could be found on small clusters of family farms in Ontario, Wisconsin, and Nebraska, the government-sponsored colony in Nova Scotia, and included a few Mormon converts who had made their way to Utah to join coreligionists who had left Iceland in the 1850s. In May 1875 Gunnlaugur Pétursson and his family moved from Wisconsin to southwest Minnesota, which soon became an important locus of Icelandic settlement in the United States. Many young Icelanders decided to continue working as agricultural labourers and domestic servants in Ontario or Wisconsin rather than going west to Manitoba. Most of these people later moved west, but not necessarily to New Iceland. By the late 1870s and early 1880s Minnesota and Dakota Territory were attracting considerable numbers of Icelandic migrants. In some cases, the people who

⁶² LAC RG 17, A I 1, volume 315, docket 14103, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 June 1875.

⁶³ See *Lögberg*, 17 January 1907.

⁶⁴ Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, vol. 2 (Winnipeg: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1943), 166.

⁶⁵ *Norðanfari*, 30 November 1875.

stayed away from the Icelandic reserve were close relatives of its first settlers. There were nine people in the first group who had siblings elsewhere in North America. For example, while Skapti Arason, his sister Guðný, and brother Benedikt were in New Iceland, their sister Guðfinna was in Toronto and another sister, Guðrún, was in Milwaukee. Family and kinship networks, common origins in Iceland and migration experiences in Canada were therefore important in shaping peoples' decisions to migrate to the Icelandic reserve, but do not tell the whole story.

The main factor that led people to accept the Canadian government's offer of resettlement in the Northwest was the hope of improving their material circumstances. Despite initial assistance from the Ontario government, the groups that arrived in 1873 and 1874 aboard the *Manitoban* and the *St. Patrick* suffered numerous hardships. There were twenty-nine deaths in the Icelandic shanties at Kinmount between October 1874 and May 1875.⁶⁶ Unemployment and general suffering among the group at Kinmount was the original impetus for John Taylor's mission to Ottawa in April 1875, and the main reason why the Dominion government sponsored the Icelandic deputation's trip to Manitoba. Individuals with families who had little money and poor employment prospects looked at the government's offer as an opportunity for a fresh start. Símon Símonarson noted that although he, his wife Valdís Guðmundsdóttir and their son Guðmundur had been treated kindly in Lindsay, Ontario, "there was little work, the pay was low, and the future prospects poor."⁶⁷ Stefán Eyjólfsson, who was a young, single man living in Milwaukee, decided to go to New Iceland to stake a claim for the rest of his

⁶⁶ AO, RG 11, 8-1, file 44476, Sigtryggur Jónasson to David Spence, 29 May 1875.

⁶⁷ UMASC, Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04). Translation by Wilhelm Kristjánsson.

family who were still in Iceland. In the summer of 1874 his father had sent him to scout opportunities in North America, and, from the Icelandic Deputation's report, New Iceland appeared to be the best that had come up thus far: "It was clear to me that my father would likely follow through on his intention of moving west when he heard about this opportunity. I therefore thought to give this place a try."⁶⁸ Once in New Iceland, Stefán claimed four river lots along the White Mud/Icelanders' River for himself, his father and two brothers.⁶⁹

As the previous chapter details, the Icelanders readily adapted themselves to the Dominion Lands homestead system. A major reason for this relatively seamless transition was that apart from its rigid geometry, the Dominion Lands system was not radically different from the settlement patterns of rural Iceland that the colonists were familiar with. Farms in both contexts were dispersed over a relatively large geographical area. The blending of the two systems was symbolized by the coexistence of Icelandic farm names with Dominion Lands Act legal descriptions. This made it possible for Benedikt Arason to send a map to a friend in Iceland that was derived from the survey grid, but could still be understood within conceptions of space and place rooted in Iceland.⁷⁰ However, there were also important differences, particularly in the size and composition of households in the Icelandic reserve. Smaller households containing a nuclear family replaced the large households of traditional Icelandic farming society, with their rotating pool of labourers. Some households were composed of single individuals who had claimed their own 160-acre homestead. In New Iceland, the barriers

⁶⁸ Thorleifur Jóakimsson Jackson, *Brot af Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1919), 9.

⁶⁹ Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga*, 241.

⁷⁰ See Chapter 2.

to family and household formation that existed in Iceland—lack of access to land and restrictive social legislation—were removed. This resulted in a proliferation of many relatively small households. In the colony statistics for 1877, there were 264 “Heads of Families” as compared with 223 households, and the average household size was just 4.5 persons.⁷¹

However, households did often include more people than simply the nuclear family. Early social welfare arrangements in New Iceland also bore a resemblance to the traditional patterns of Icelandic rural society in that settler couples sometimes fostered the children of needy families. Símon Símonarson and his wife Valdís Guðmundsdóttir took in five-year-old Guðrún Jóhannsdóttir after her father died of smallpox in October 1876. Símon recalled that Guðrún’s mother Jóhanna Þorbergsdóttir was hard pressed to care for her four surviving children and elderly mother. In the spring of 1877 Símon and Valdís took in a single mother and her daughter, who stayed with them through the following winter.⁷²

Arrangements such as these illustrate how the reserve community was built on webs of relationships among the settlers. Household formation and settlement patterns were shaped by kinship and regional affiliation, particularly in the crucial first year. Kin groups frequently formed multi-family households, or clusters of contiguous homesteads. North of Gimli, the brothers Friðbjörn and Þorlákur Björnsson, who were married to the sisters Anna Sigríður and Þórdís Árnadóttir claimed adjacent quarter sections, which they called *Nýhagi* (New Pasture). The two couples at first lived together in a single log cabin

⁷¹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 220, docket 22684, Taylor to Lowe, 1 April 1878.

⁷² UMASC, Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04).

along with ten children, five from each family, but later built an additional dwelling.⁷³ To the south, Guðný Aradóttir, her husband Sigurbjörn Jóhannesson, and their three daughters settled at *Kjalvík* (Keel Cove) south of Gimli along with Guðný's married brother Benedikt and unmarried brother Skapti. The claimants of the adjacent homestead, *Kilsnes* (Creek Point), were Indriði Indriðason and Sigurlaug Jóhannesdóttir, the sister of Guðný's husband Sigurbjörn. These sorts of living arrangements were a source of mutual support, particularly in times of crisis, such as when Guðný's husband died in January 1877.⁷⁴ However, too many deaths, particularly among the adult women, could result in the dissolution of the household. Sigurður Jósúa Björnsson, one of the first settlers to abandon his homestead and leave the colony, lost his twenty-four year-old wife Elín Guðmundsdóttir and mother-in-law Helga Jónasdóttir in the spring of 1876.⁷⁵

There was also a tendency for people from the same districts in Iceland to claim land near one another even if they were not closely related. While people from Þingeyjarsýsla represented only 20 per cent of the first group, they accounted for 32 per cent of the settlers in *Víðirnesbyggð* (Willow Point settlement), and were concentrated primarily in Township 18 and the southern end of Township 19. People from Húnavatnsýsla settled north of Gimli, but especially Townships 20 and 21, which later became *Árnesbyggð* (River Point Settlement). In the case of people from Eyjafjarðarsýsla, who formed the majority of the first group and who settled throughout New Iceland, being neighbours in a particular commune prior to emigration seems to

⁷³ George Freeman, ed. *Pembina County Pioneer Daughter Biographies: Volume I - Icelandic Settlements of Akra/Cavalier, Gardar, and Mountain North Dakota* (Grand Forks, ND: Laxa Press, 2007), 45.

⁷⁴ Jackson, *Frá Austri til Vesturs*, 69-81.

⁷⁵ Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, vol. 3 (Winnipeg: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1945), 255.

have helped shape decisions about where to settle. The claimants of three adjacent quarter sections south of Gimli all came from Saurbæjarhreppur in Eyjafjarðarsýsla.⁷⁶

For those colonists who did not travel as part of extended family groups, friends from the same region could be an important source of support and mutual aid. This was the case for Símon Símonarson and Erlendur Ólafsson who emigrated from the same commune in Skagfjarðarsýsla and claimed adjacent homesteads. During the first year their families shared a house, and later frequently worked cooperatively as they attempted to establish farms in the reserve.⁷⁷

This ultimately proved to be a difficult task. Over the next several years, many of the first settlers endured numerous tragedies and setbacks as they worked to adapt their old rural pattern of life to their new context. For most, New Iceland did not live up to their expectations and they ultimately moved elsewhere. One of the most important sources of dissatisfaction fuelling out-migration was the colony's isolation. This problem was not of the settlers' own making. In choosing the site, the Icelandic deputation did not seek to isolate their people from the wider settler society, and the prospect of being isolated was not the reason why the migrants took up the government's offer of resettlement. Rather, they hoped to build a large and relatively homogeneous Icelandic settler community alongside family, friends and former neighbours, while at the same time enjoying links with networks of trade and social and cultural exchange that would allow their community to achieve considerable material progress. The importance that the Icelandic deputation placed on the closeness of the reserve to the proposed route of

⁷⁶ Helgi Sigurðsson of Helgasstaðir (SE 32-18-4E), Sigurður Jónsson of Fögruvellir (NE 32-18-4E), and Jóhann Vilhjálmur Jónsson of Bólstaður (SE 5-19-4E).

⁷⁷ UMASC, Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04).

the Canadian Pacific Railway highlights this motivation. The Canadian government's decision to move the route of the Pacific Railway to the south and west in the latter 1870s shifted ease of transportation and access to markets from being one of the New Iceland's main attractions to one of its greatest drawbacks. Gimli took its place alongside Battleford, Prince Albert and Edmonton as a disappointed population centre along the rejected Lake Manitoba-North Saskatchewan route.⁷⁸

In building their lives in the reserve, the Icelandic colonists had to navigate through the uncertain waters of state immigration and colonization policies that were unevenly implemented, which were subject to change and over which they had little control. They also had to carve out a niche for themselves in an unfamiliar environment alongside an Aboriginal population who sometimes rendered assistance but at the same time resented the Icelanders' presence and feared its consequences for their competing claim to the region. All of these issues were in play in the single greatest crisis to afflict the Icelandic reserve—the smallpox epidemic of 1876-77.

⁷⁸ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 178.

Chapter 4
Quarantined Within a New Order:
Smallpox and the Spatial Practices of Colonization

On 24 September 1876, the Reverend James Settee conducted Sunday services at Sandy Bar, a native village on the southwest coast of Lake Winnipeg, in what is now the Interlake region of Manitoba. In his capacity as a Church of England missionary, Settee was a regular visitor to the native settlements around the lake and counted several converts among the Sandy Bar band. However, that day the congregation also included a group of Icelandic immigrants who had recently settled in and around the native village. Settee said prayers in Cree, Ojibwa, and English, and one of the colonists provided Icelandic translation. Settee's sermon was drawn from the first Epistle of John, a passage emphasizing God's infinite love, and the duty of God's children to love one another.¹ The missionary probably chose this particular passage as part of an effort to diffuse tensions between the natives and the settlers; the arrival of the Icelanders earlier that summer had triggered a tense confrontation over land that almost became violent.² Still, their joint attendance at Reverend Settee's service suggests that the two groups had a complex relationship; fear, suspicion, and resentment did not preclude cooperation and friendly interaction in specific circumstances. However, in this context, as in many others, the mixing of indigenous and settler populations had fatal consequences. Smallpox broke out in the fall 1876 and within two months had decimated the Sandy Bar band. A doctor sent by the Canadian government reported that their numbers had been

¹ Church Missionary Society [hereafter CMS], reel 55, C C 1 O 57, "Extract from the journal of Rev. James Settee, 8 Sept 1876 to 15 May 1877". 1 John 4:16, "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."

² Thorleifur Jóakimsson Jackson, *Brot af Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1919), 33.

reduced from fifty or sixty to only seventeen. He found the scarred survivors huddled in tents surrounded by newly dug graves.³ The band's homes and possessions were ordered burned to prevent further infection, and shortly thereafter Dominion Land Surveyors arrived to plant posts marking the boundaries of the proposed Icelandic town of *Sandvík* (Sand Cove).⁴

This chapter examines the role of the 1876-1877 smallpox epidemic in establishing a new settler-oriented colonial order in the Interlake region of Manitoba. At first glance, this case seems to confirm general understandings about the relationship between disease and colonialism: the arrival of a group of Europeans on a colonial frontier precipitated an epidemic that devastated the native population and cleared the way for the appropriation of their land and resources. This generalized story, at best, serves only to highlight the tragic outcome of a complex set of events. At worst, it obscures that complexity by casting Aboriginal demographic decline as a primarily biologically driven process. What happened at Lake Winnipeg in 1876-1877 was not inevitable; it was the product of a historically contingent set of circumstances. Historical geographers of medicine Jody Decker and Paul Hackett have demonstrated that the impact of disease on Aboriginal populations in Northwest North America varied greatly

³ Dr. J.S. Lynch to J.A.N. Provencher, 11 April 1877 in Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development fonds, RG 10 [hereafter RG 10], Black Series, reel C-10112, volume 3638, file 7213, "Clandeboye Agency – Correspondence Regarding an Outbreak of Smallpox among the Indians of Lake Winnipeg and the Subsequent Vaccination campaign."

⁴ Archives of Manitoba [hereafter AM], Surveyors' Field Books, GR 1601, no. 664, "George McPhillips, Survey of the Villages of Sandy Bar and Riverton, 23 September-6 October 1876."

over time, and changed with shifting patterns of trade, migration, and settlement.⁵ From the onset of European contact, epidemics stimulated migrations, shifted balances of power, and altered boundaries between peoples.⁶

The 1876-1877 smallpox epidemic demonstrates how Aboriginal dispossession and settler-colonialism were linked through the overlapping governmental apparatuses of land administration and public health. The measures taken in response to the epidemic allowed the Canadian state to exercise new forms of power over spaces and people where its influence had previously been quite limited. This occurred both through coercive means and—perhaps more significantly in a context where the state’s presence was relatively light—the self-regulation of individuals and groups acting in their perceived best interests. Ultimately, however, quarantine and sanitation measures helped to reify a new spatial order mandating the compartmentalization of land and people into a system of racially-segregated reserves that was integral to the Canadian colonization of the Northwest during the late nineteenth century.

The Icelandic reserve’s legal status as a homogeneous ethnic colony did not mean that the colonists were isolated from the other inhabitants of the region. From the time of their arrival, the Icelanders were engaged in a web of economic, social and cultural interactions with the local indigenous population, the established settler community, and Canadian government officials. Lake Winnipeg had long been a vital transportation corridor linking the Red River settlement in the south with the fur-trading centres of the

⁵ Jody F. Decker, "Depopulation of the Northern Plains Natives," *Social Science and Medicine* 33, no. 4 (1991): 381-93; Paul Hackett, "A Very Remarkable Sickness": *Epidemics in the Petit Nord, 1670-1846* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 237-38.

⁶ Hackett, "A Very Remarkable Sickness", 242.

north. By the early 1870s it was being regularly traveled by Anglo-Canadian explorers, journalists, and government officials. In addition a handful of settlers were attracted by the region's fish, timber, and mineral resources.⁷ The lands around the lake were home to a substantial Ojibwa, Cree, and mixed-blood population including the area that became the Icelandic reserve.⁸ These people continued to occupy their homes, even as treaty negotiators, surveyors, and the immigrants themselves disregarded their claims and sought to impose a new order. In short, the Icelandic reserve was a dynamic contact zone in which frequent and sustained interaction across ethno-cultural boundaries was the norm, and was fundamentally shaped by the asymmetrical power relations of colonialism.⁹

Strangely, a contact perspective emphasizing co-presence and interaction has been largely absent from the historical writing about New Iceland. Instead, it is the notion of the colony's separateness and isolation that has shaped historians' interpretations. Recent monographs by the Icelandic writers Guðjón Arngrímsson and Jónas Thor construct New Iceland as a *terra nullius* where the immigrants attempted to replicate their old-world networks of kin and community and fulfill previously frustrated national aspirations.¹⁰

⁷ See Frank Tough, *'As Their Natural Resources Fail': Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870-1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996).

⁸ See Alexander Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories, including the negotiations on which they were based, and other information relating thereto* (Toronto: Belfords, Clarke, 1880), 155-57.

⁹ My use of the term "contact zone" follows Mary Louise Pratt's definition of it as a place where "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London;New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

¹⁰ Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000); Jónas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002).

Their brief mentions of Aboriginal people simply repeat well-worn racial and cultural stereotypes about native passivity in the face of white encroachment that have long ago been exposed as convenient fictions of colonialism.¹¹ One important exception is anthropologist Anne Brydon's analysis of Icelandic-Canadian mythic narratives about contact with Aboriginal people. Brydon reveals how stories stressing cooperation, friendly interaction, and mutual respect have obscured a more contentious history involving protracted disputes over land and bitterness over the tragedy of the smallpox epidemic. She argues that this refashioning of history is part of an Icelandic-Canadian narrative strategy to diminish the painful legacy of colonialism.¹² While this chapter also recognizes and explores the role of the Icelanders as colonizers, its primary concern is with identifying how both they and the Aboriginal people they displaced were caught up in the same project of colonial governance. It therefore seeks to draw connections between immigration and colonization, two topics that are frequently treated as historiographically distinct.¹³

The discourses of race, progress, and civilization, typically used to legitimate rule over indigenous people could also mark other Europeans as racially and culturally degenerate.¹⁴ The 1876-1877 smallpox epidemic exposed the ambiguous position of the Icelandic immigrants in the emerging colonial order of the Canadian Northwest. While

¹¹ In describing the native inhabitants of the Icelandic reserve, Arngrímsson, states, "The Salteaux [sic] were a peaceful people, who offered little resistance when the white man came and took their land. Like the animals they hunted, they were a semi-nomadic people, seldom settling for long in one place...." Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland*, 194. Also see Thor, *Icelanders in North America*, 102-03.

¹² Anne Brydon, "Dreams and Claims: Icelandic-Aboriginal Interactions in the Manitoba Interlake," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2001): 164-90.

¹³ Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 19.

¹⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 10.

they were unquestionably the agents of European colonization at the local level, actively displacing the indigenous population with the backing of the Canadian state, as impoverished, non-English speaking immigrants, unfamiliar with local conditions and dependent on government rations for survival, they were also clearly subordinate within the wider settler society. Their susceptibility to smallpox was interpreted by some Anglo-Canadians as a function of their inherent racial characteristics as well as their specific material circumstances. In a report commissioned by Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba and Keewatin Alexander Morris, Dr. James Spencer Lynch provided a detailed description of the Icelanders' colony, and an evaluation of their future prospects as settlers and as citizens of Canada. Dr. Lynch's experience as medical officer at Gimli during the epidemic led him to a mainly negative evaluation: "Centuries of isolation and intermarriage have had the effect of reducing their physical condition to a point below which they are likely to be successful in the rude contest with western pioneers." According to Dr. Lynch, the principal way for the Icelanders to survive and thrive in their new home was to assimilate with more vigorous peoples. Apart from exogamy Dr. Lynch prescribed modifications in diet, hygiene, and housing that he believed would ameliorate the worst defects of the Icelandic character.¹⁶ The essential problem that Lynch addressed was the Icelanders' ability to participate successfully in western colonization. The smallpox epidemic had brought this into question, and as a physician, Lynch was called upon to translate his knowledge of medicine and health into recommendations that would serve the prerogatives of state policy. In his view, the improvement of the Icelanders' health and their ultimate success as colonists was

¹⁶ LAC, Department of the Secretary of State fonds, RG 6 [hereafter RG 6], A 1, volume 28, docket 536, Alexander Morris to R.W. Scott, 21 April 1877.

inextricably linked to their adoption of new modes of behaviour and even integration with Anglo-Canadian settlers.

This example illustrates Michel Foucault's insights on the importance of public health and medicine as instruments of governmental power.¹⁷ The literature on public health in colonial contexts that has followed from Foucault's work has demonstrated how medicine functioned not simply as a means of relieving human suffering, but also as a key instrument of governance. Public health was part of the matrix of governing power that rendered subject populations knowable in the statistical languages of state bureaucratic administration.¹⁸ As Nayan Shah has noted in the context of nineteenth century San Francisco, public health was one of the most powerful mechanisms used by the civic government to regulate the property and conduct of the city's immigrant population.¹⁹ During the late nineteenth century, migrants were subject to coercive public health measures such as quarantine, forced hospital confinement, and destruction of personal property to a far greater degree than more established sections of society.²⁰ In the Canadian context, Maureen Lux and Mary Ellen Kelm have demonstrated how Aboriginal people were subject to even more intense and sustained regimes of public

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 176.

¹⁸ Alison Bashford, "Medicine, Gender, and Empire," in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 112-13.

¹⁹ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

²⁰ Esyllt W. Jones, "'Co-operation in all Human Endeavour': Quarantine and Immigrant Disease Vectors in the 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic in Winnipeg," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 22, no. 1 (2005): 58. See also Esyllt W. Jones, "Contact Across a Diseased Boundary: Urban Space and Social Interaction During Winnipeg's Influenza Epidemic, 1918-1919," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 13 (2002): 113-39; Esyllt W. Jones, *Influenza 1918: Disease, Death and Struggle in Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

health and sanitation that reinforced ideas about Aboriginal inferiority and served as a powerful justification for the policy of assimilation.²¹ By placing migrant and indigenous experience with colonial medicine in the same frame, we can analyze their mutual constitution as colonial subjects through what Nicholas Thomas calls the project of *sanitizing-colonizing*, in which there was “a constant slippage... between interests in reducing mortality and other agendas; political, moral, and cultural impositions were justified by their association and conflation with the programme of sanitation.”²²

In the case of the 1876 smallpox epidemic in the Icelandic reserve, the other agenda at work was the creation of a new system of racial reserves that distinguished white from aboriginal space, and new immigrants from the older settled community. Australian historian of medicine Alison Bashford has noted how both race and public health were segregative discourses; “spatial segregation on public health grounds often dovetailed with already existing spatial management of people through racial rationales: indigenous people in various systems of reserves and mission stations.”²³ In the Icelandic reserve, the spatial management of people had, prior to the epidemic, been implemented only partially and unevenly. It was the disruption created by the emergency that allowed the new order to be translated into a more concrete form. Throughout the entire period of the smallpox epidemic there were two teams of surveyors traveling through the Icelandic

²¹ See Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900-50* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998); Maureen K. Lux, *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Mary Jane McCallum, "The Last Frontier: Isolation and Aboriginal Health," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 22, no. 1 (2005): 103-20.

²² Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 116.

²³ Alison Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 130.

reserve, marking out the sections, quarter-sections, and town sites with iron stakes. A third surveying and construction crew worked on a colonization road connecting the three proposed Icelandic town sites of Gimli, Sandvík, and Icelander's River.²⁴

During the 1870s, three key terms were used for communities that surveyors traversed: *settlement*, *reserve*, and *colony*. These terms were often used interchangeably; however, each had more specific meanings that illuminate some of the transformations taking place in the Canadian Northwest during this period. *Settlement* described both a particular place and a process: the taking possession of a space often constructed as empty or inadequately utilized. It is therefore associated, quite correctly, with the ideas and practices of acquisitive European settler colonialism.²⁵ Yet during the mid-to-late nineteenth-century settlement was also used to describe communities of native people who had adopted some modes of living traditionally associated with Europeans, such as living in permanent houses and cultivating plots of land. Examples of such places include the Swampy Cree and Ojibwa villages that developed near Christian missions and Hudson's Bay Company posts around Lake Winnipeg during the mid-nineteenth-century. Many of these places, such as Norway House and Fort Alexander, ultimately became Indian reserves.²⁶

Today, the term *reserve* is of course most commonly associated with Aboriginal people, particularly with their dispossession and marginalization. The extinguishing of Aboriginal title by treaty and the creation of Indian reserves was an integral part of the nascent Canadian state's efforts to assert control over its newly acquired lands in the

²⁴ AM, Surveyors' Field Books, GR 1601, nos. 651-654 and 674-678.

²⁵ R. Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 47.

²⁶ Tough, 'As Their Natural Resources Fail', 143-44.

early 1870s. However, the language of reserve was also used to describe land grants made to a wide variety of corporate entities and social groupings. Reserve, essentially denoted the legal relationship of these groups to the land distribution policies of the state. As a means of encouraging immigration to Manitoba and the Northwest Territories, reserves were set aside for the exclusive use of particular ethno-cultural or religious communities after—and sometimes before—the extinguishment of Aboriginal title. The Icelandic reserve on the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg in 1875 was the first such experiment launched by the Canadian government in the Northwest Territories. Its creation followed the successful example set by Mennonites from Russia and French-Canadians from New England in Manitoba the previous year.²⁷

These settlement reserves were also sometimes referred to as *colonies*. This term was used to emphasize their status as collective arrangements based on shared ethnic, religious, or ideological characteristics.²⁸ In the case of subordinate ethno-cultural groups, colony could also be used to indicate—in a more precise way than settlement or reserve—their dual status as the local agents of empire and the subjects of its civilizing mission.²⁹ These groups of course had their own names for their communities and often renamed local physical features to underline their possession of the land. Hence, the Icelandic colonists renamed the White Mud River *Íslendingafljót* (Icelander's River). They called each of the districts within New Iceland *byggðir* or settlements. Immigrant

²⁷ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 186.

²⁸ See A.W. Rasporich, "Utopian Ideals and Community Settlements in Western Canada, 1880-1914," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 352-77.

²⁹ See, for example, the reports of Lord Dufferin's visit to the Icelandic reserve in 1877 in *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 17 September 1877.

Friðrik Sveinsson also used the latter term to describe the native settlement at Sandy Bar and White Mud River, which occupied the same territory as the developing Icelandic *Fljótabyggð* (River settlement).³⁰

According to the missionary James Settee, a permanent Ojibwa village at Sandy Bar was created in the autumn of 1871. He told the Church Missionary Society that “some of the Indians who are still wandering about had agreed amongst themselves...that they wanted to take the example of the Whites and follow a civilized life.” Settee stated that many had been born in the region and considered it their home. They chose the site for permanent settlement because its abundant fisheries and game offered many advantages for “new settlers”.³¹ When Settee visited the village in 1875 he found a total of twenty-four families and a few widows residing there. He expected that the village would soon be a large one, and reported that a school house was under construction, and that the people had requested a teacher be provided for them.³² By this time, the population may have included a group of Swampy Cree from Norway House who had also selected the site for an agricultural colony. They wrote to Lieutenant Governor Morris and requested that the region be designated an Indian reserve. This proposal was looked upon favourably until the prospect of an Icelandic reserve in the same location appeared in the summer of 1875.³³ The delegation of Icelanders that chose the site as heart of their proposed colony stated that the Indians living at Sandy Bar were “Christianized and civilized” and not to be feared. Based on the assurances received

³⁰ Jackson, *Brot af Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands*, 33.

³¹ CMS, reel 55, C C 1 O 57, Settee to CMS, 9 December 1872.

³² CMS, reel 55, C C 1 O 57, Settee Annual Report, 23 November 1875.

³³ LAC, RG 10, Black Series, reel C-10111, volume 3636, file 6743, “Norway House Agency. Correspondence regarding the removal of Indians from Norway House to Grassy Narrows.”

from Morris, they confidently asserted that “as soon as the Icelanders begin to settle here, these few Indians will be located elsewhere.”³⁴

This did not happen as expected. The Sandy Bar band, and a related band on Big Island, continued to live in the region long after the Icelanders arrived. In spite of aggressive behaviour on the part of the settlers, including the occupation of native-built log cabins, it was only the death of the majority of the band members during the smallpox epidemic and the destruction of their homes by public health officials that muted their resistance to Icelandic encroachment.³⁵ Both bands attempted to assert their claim to the region at negotiations with treaty officials in the summer of 1876. The land in question was technically included in Treaty 2 (1871), although neither band had taken part in those negotiations. Kat-te-pe-nais, Chief of the Big Island band, wrote to the Minister of the Interior insisting that his band be included in a treaty, and plans were made for a meeting at Dog Head in late July 1876 to bring his and several bands under the provisions of Treaty 5 (1875).

The ensuing treaty settlement was a profound disappointment for the Big Island and Sandy Bar bands. The treaty commissioners, through a combination of open threats and gentle persuasion, forced a uniform template of Indian administration onto several resistant groups that held different ideas about their formal relationship with the government. First, the treaty commissioners demanded that the five Island bands—Big Island, Blood Vein, Jack Fish, Dog Head, and Sandy Bar—elect a single chief and four

³⁴ LAC, RG 17, “General Correspondence” series [hereafter A I 1], volume 140, docket 14663, John Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875. On Morris’s assurance to Taylor that the Sandy Bar band would be moved see LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 166, docket 17253, Taylor to John Lowe, 20 August 1876.

³⁵ Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985), 264-65.

councillors. The bands protested, saying that they were distinct from each other and did not wish to unite. Kat-te-pe-nais was especially vocal in his opposition to the plan; he claimed that if he signed under the conditions outlined by the commissioners, it would create a schism in his band. Commissioners Thomas Howard and J. Lestock Reid told him to either sign or go home with nothing. Ultimately, Ka-te-pe-nais acceded to their demands and signed, resulting in forty members of his hundred-member band renouncing his leadership and the treaty.³⁷ Part of the reason for the split was Ka-te-pe-nais's failure to secure Big Island as a reserve; the band was directed to remove to the Bad Throat River on the east side of the lake, which some of them apparently did.³⁸ The treaty was even more of a disappointment for the Sandy Bar band. The commissioners denied that they were a distinct band, arguing that they should properly be considered part of the St. Peter's (Peguis) band. The Sandy Bar band attempted to have the White Mud River set aside as a reserve but were rebuffed by the commissioners. In the end, only twenty-seven of the approximately sixty band members signed the treaty.³⁹ The Big Island and Sandy Bar bands were the only island bands to be denied their chosen reserve sites; all of the small reserve sites suggested by the other bands were accepted. It is clear that the reason for this decision was the fact that the land in question had been granted to the Icelanders. However, in defiance of the treaty settlement, even among those who signed, many members of the Sandy Bar and Big Island bands returned to their homes for the

³⁷ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 23 September 1876.

³⁸ On 21 March 1877 Health Officer William Drever found the body of the Old Chief and three others at the Bad Throat River. See AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1517, Drever to Morris, 3 August 1877.

³⁹ The correspondent for the *Free Press* gave the band's total number, including women and children, as forty. See *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 23 September 1876.

remainder of the summer of 1876. By this time the Icelanders were beginning to move north from their settlement at Gimli to claim homesteads at White Mud River, Sandy Bar, and on Big Island. In September 1876 John Taylor reported that the Indians living in the Icelandic reserve had refused to leave the area, and predicted that their continued presence would be a source of problems.⁴⁰

The Icelanders' northward migration resulted in a dispute between the two groups that almost turned violent. The only record of this encounter is Friðrik Sveinsson's 1919 reminiscence '*Fyrsta viðkyning við Rauðskinna*' (First Acquaintance with the Red-skins). Sveinsson, who was ten years old at the time, was among a group of three families who were the first Icelanders to settle at White Mud River in the summer of 1876. According to his account, there were a few *fjölskyldur villimanna* (families of savages) living in tents by the river when they arrived. Friðrik's stepfather Ólafur Ólafsson became embroiled in a dispute with John Ramsay, one of the principal men of the Sandy Bar band. When Ramsay attempted to stop Ólafur from building on a piece of land that he claimed, the Icelander threatened him with an axe. Ramsay retreated, but returned a few days later supported by several armed men and a translator. He told the Icelanders that they were building illegally because the north side of the river was not part of the Icelandic reserve. Ólafur agreed to consult with the authorities, which satisfied Ramsay. After Ólafur's right to build on the land had been confirmed by a Dominion Indian agent, he and Ramsay worked out an agreement whereby Ramsay could continue to cultivate a garden and camp on Ólafur's homestead.⁴¹ Once smallpox broke

⁴⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 166, docket 17253, Taylor to John Lowe, 20 August 1876.

⁴¹ Jackson, *Brot af Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands*, 31-37.

out, friendly exchanges between the two groups appear to have come to an end. Ramsay later reported to Dr. James Spencer Lynch that the Icelanders had refused to offer assistance to his people when they became ill, and even demanded payment for helping to bury the dead.⁴² In forwarding the report to Ottawa, Acting Indian Superintendent J.A.N. Provencher stated that he had previously received similar reports of the Icelanders' behaviour.⁴³

It was in this fractious contact zone in the northern part of the Icelandic reserve that the smallpox epidemic began. It appears to have been part of world-wide outbreak of smallpox in 1876 that was reported in major ports such as Liverpool, Halifax, Quebec, Montreal, and San Francisco.⁴⁴ The group of Icelanders who arrived in the colony in late summer 1876 had recently passed through several of the Atlantic ports where the disease was prevalent. According to the journal of immigrant Þorgrímur Jónsson, smallpox was carried to the colony in some clothing purchased in Quebec City by a man named Jón Jónsson.⁴⁵ Þorgrímur, Jón and their families were part of a small group that sailed north from Gimli to claim land along the White Mud River in early September 1876. Jón had been too weak to help with the rowing during the journey and shortly after their arrival he broke out with a fever. It is likely that he was among the group that occupied the house of Elizabeth Fidler, a mixed-race woman who lived with the Sandy Bar band.⁴⁶ In the

⁴² Lynch to Provencher, 11 April 1877 and Provencher to Mills, 16 April, 1877 in LAC, RG 10, Black Series, reel C-10112, volume 3638, file 7213.

⁴³ Lynch to Provencher, 11 April 1877 and Provencher to Mills, 16 April, 1877 in LAC, RG 10, Black Series, reel C-10112, volume 3638, file 7213.

⁴⁴ See *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 4 January 1877.

⁴⁵ Jackson, *Brot af Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands*, 32.

⁴⁶ Fidler was staying in the St. Peter's reserve at the time. She later claimed that she had been ordered to leave the area by John Taylor, the Icelandic agent at Gimli. See LAC, Department of the Interior fonds, RG 15 [hereafter RG 15], "Dominion Lands

cramped quarters of the 23x14 foot cabin the disease soon spread to other members of the group, including Þorgrímur's family. On 5 October his two-year old son became the first Icelandic victim of the disease.⁴⁷ Fidler's house became known among the Icelanders as *Bóla* (pox) because of its association with the beginning of the epidemic.⁴⁸

While the immigrants believed that the sickness was related to their recent migration experience, there was confusion and disagreement over what disease it was. John Taylor, the resident government agent responsible for administering the Icelandic reserve, stated that the "Icelandic doctors"—referring to several individuals who possessed various kinds of formal and informal medical training—were convinced that the disease was not smallpox. Taylor reassured his superiors in Ottawa that there was no need for alarm, and proposed vaccinating the settlers as a precaution.⁴⁹ While Taylor was able to procure some vaccine, it ultimately proved to be ineffective and the disease spread through the colony unchecked. When three Icelanders and seven Indians died at White Mud River in early November, Sigtryggur Jónasson, who by this time was the Assistant Icelandic Agent, requested that Taylor immediately send for medical help: "I think it is necessary to have a skilled physician from Manitoba to come down here to examine some of the patients, provide medicine and prescribe the proper treatment of the disease, of

Branch" series [hereafter D II 1], reel T-13113, volume 409, file 105883, "Elizabeth Fidler, Claim for loss of houses and improvements occasioned by the occupation of Icelandic settlers."

⁴⁷ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 183, docket 18913, Sigtryggur Jónasson to Lowe, 26 February 1877.

⁴⁸ Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga*, 219-20.

⁴⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 170, docket 17669, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 12 October 1876.

which the Icelanders, if it be the small-pox, are totally ignorant, that disease not being prevalent in Iceland.”⁵⁰

In 1876, neither the Icelanders nor their Aboriginal neighbours had much first-hand knowledge of the physical effects of the smallpox virus. However, the devastating results of past epidemics were preserved in their oral and written historical traditions. When recording the epidemic in their respective journals Þorgrímur Jónsson and James Settee both made reference to previous epidemics that had afflicted their people.⁵¹ Over the long term, these two groups had remarkably similar histories with the disease. Both had been affected by disastrous smallpox epidemics in the eighteenth century. In 1707-09, the disease killed twenty-six percent of Iceland’s population.⁵² Iceland was affected by the world-wide epidemic of the early 1780s, which also devastated a village of Cree, Assiniboine, and Ojibwa at the mouth of the Red River around 1780.⁵³ The effects of smallpox were mitigated after 1800 with the introduction of vaccination as a preventative measure. In the late 1830s, these vaccination campaigns in northwest North America by the Hudson’s Bay Company and in Iceland by Danish colonial authorities helped stop another epidemic in its tracks.⁵⁴ But by 1876, neither the Icelanders nor the natives had

⁵⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 179, docket 18595, Jónasson to Lowe, 20 January 1877.

⁵¹ Jackson, *Brot af Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands*, 32. CMS, reel 55, C C 1 O 57, Settee to CMS, 8 February 1877.

⁵² See Jón Steffensen, "Smallpox in Iceland," *Nordisk Medicinhistorisk Ársbok* 41 (1977): 41-56.

⁵³ Hackett, "A Very Remarkable Sickness", 105-06. On this epidemic, also see Jody F. Decker, "Tracing Historical Diffusion Patterns: The Case of the 1780-82 Smallpox Epidemic Among the Indians of Western Canada," *Native Studies Review* 4, no. 1 & 2 (1988): 1-24.

⁵⁴ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, *Historical Dictionary of Iceland* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 139-40; Paul Hackett, "Averting Disaster: The Hudson's Bay

been subject to a comprehensive vaccination campaign, and therefore the generations born since 1840 were susceptible to smallpox. In his 1877 report on the epidemic, Jónasson blamed the authorities in Iceland for becoming lax in their duty to vaccinate every person in the country. He asserted that those settlers who had been properly vaccinated in the past five to seven years did not contract the disease.⁵⁵

By the time John Taylor wrote to Dr. David Young at Lower Fort Garry requesting medical help, rumours of smallpox among the Icelanders and Indians at Sandy Bar had been circulating at Red River for some time. News had been carried to St. Peter's by friends of the Sandy Bar band, and from there conveyed to Winnipeg. Local government officials began to take these rumours seriously only after the *Manitoba Daily Free Press* published a letter from one of the surveyors at work at Sandy Bar on 15 November. Based on this report the paper's editor asserted "there can be no doubt that it is the small-pox that is raging, and that too of a most virulent type."⁵⁶ J.A.N. Provencher sent Dr. James Spencer Lynch to the Icelandic colony to assist Dr. Young and to treat the Indians of the district. On 22 November Drs. Young and Lynch reported from Gimli that "The disease here is smallpox of a mild variety varioloid but very fatal owing to unfavourable circumstances bad food, want of ventilation. About twenty persons had died in this immediate neighbourhood within the past ten days; it is reported that only two Indians are left living at Sandy Bar out of twenty."⁵⁷ With this official

Company and Smallpox in Western Canada during the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 78, no. 3 (2004): 607-09.

⁵⁵ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 179, docket 18595, Jónasson to Lowe, 20 January 1877.

⁵⁶ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 15 November 1876.

⁵⁷ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B3, Ketcheson Collection, Telegram Book # 3, no. 6, Drs. Young and Lynch to Provencher, 22 November 1876.

pronouncement, government officials began to formulate their response, but it was too late; the disease had already spread throughout the Icelandic colony and its immediate environs. By the time the epidemic had run its course, 103 Icelanders had died out of a population of approximately 1,200. According to a list compiled by Sigtyggur Jónasson, the vast majority of the victims were children; only twenty-five persons out of the total dead were older than twelve years of age.⁵⁸ No precise numbers, either of population or mortality, are available for the Aboriginal population. According to the *Manitoba Free Press* reporter who attended the Treaty 5 negotiations in July 1876, the Big Island band consisted of 100 persons and the Sandy Bar band fifty-seven. In January 1877, Lt. Governor Morris stated that the number of ascertained deaths was fifty-two, but based on information received from Dr. Lynch, he believed the number of Indian dead could be as high as 200.⁵⁹

The disease was only identified as a problem of public health and governance when officially pronounced upon by two white physicians working as agents of the Canadian government. However, at least one person had correctly identified the disease two months earlier. On 25 September Sarah Settee, the mixed-blood wife of the missionary James Settee, told the Sandy Bar band that the disease afflicting the Icelanders was smallpox, and that they should leave Sandy Bar if they valued their lives. This advice was apparently ignored by all but one man who fled with his family, possibly spreading the disease to the other side of Lake Winnipeg. James Settee also disregarded his wife's claims even though he acknowledged that she had first hand knowledge of the

⁵⁸ "Report on Icelandic Colony in Keewatin (Mr. S. Jonassen, Assistant Icelandic Agent)," Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1878, no. 9, p. 69.

⁵⁹ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B2, Ketcheson Collection, Correspondence, no. 221, Morris to R.W. Scott, 23 January 1877.

disease.⁶⁰ Sarah's medical knowledge was discounted because of her race and gender and lack of professional credentials. The same can be said for the Icelandic immigrant Rebekka Guðmundsdóttir, who had received training as a nurse and midwife in northern Iceland. Rebekka's role in distributing helpful medicines to smallpox victims was noted in community histories, but her name does not appear on the list of Icelanders employed by the Keewatin Board of Health or in any of the official documentation.⁶¹

Epidemics are not only the naturally occurring result of discrete biological processes, but also events produced by public health authorities reading a situation and taking particular courses of action. As the epidemic is pronounced upon and actions are taken to address it, new forms of knowledge about a population are generated and new modes of governance are created.⁶² The response to the 1876 smallpox epidemic was, quite literally, the creation of a new government that served both as a Board of Health and as a territorial authority for Keewatin, the region north and east of the province of Manitoba and including the Icelandic reserve. This territory was created in October 1876, largely at the behest of Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris, to respond to the planned transfer of the government of the Northwest Territories from Winnipeg to a point further west. Morris argued that because of limited transport and communication networks in the region, it would be utterly impossible to govern the areas north and east of Manitoba. The Keewatin Act stipulated that the region was to be governed by a

⁶⁰ CMS, reel 55, C C 1 O 57, Settee to CMS, 8 February 1877.

⁶¹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 179, docket 1851, Taylor to J.C. Taché, 15 January 1877. Thorleifur Jóakimsson Jackson, *Framhald á Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1923), 100; Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965), 67.

⁶² Alison Bashford, "Epidemic and Governmentality: Smallpox in Sydney, 1881," *Critical Public Health* 9, no. 4 (1999): 306.

council of five to ten men, headed by the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba. The Dominion government did not appoint this council until the emergency of the smallpox epidemic forced its hand.⁶³ Morris recommended a council of six senior civil servants from various departments and agencies of the Dominion and Manitoba governments. The constant slippage between the council's role as a territorial government and as an instrument of public health enforcement was manifested in how it was alternately referred to in official documents as the Council of Keewatin and as the Keewatin Board of Health.⁶⁴

The Board of Health directed a massive mobilization of state resources to stem the spread of the disease. In the first instance this effort was directed toward the containment and treatment of smallpox within the Icelandic reserve and adjacent locations. Dr. William Augustus Baldwin was sent to assist Drs. Young and Lynch in this task. Native guides and assistants transported the doctors and relief supplies through the district, buried the dead and burned infected property. The doctors centralized the treatment of the sick at a hospital at Gimli and employed several young Icelanders as nurses, orderlies, and translators. Towards the end of the epidemic, an old Hudson's Bay Company physician, Dr. Henry Beddome oversaw the disinfection of Icelanders' property.

⁶³ The Council of Keewatin only ever functioned during the smallpox epidemic. It was never again re-constituted, leaving the Icelandic reserve under the direct authority of the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba until 1881, when it was incorporated into the province. See Lewis H. Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government in the North-West Territories, 1870-97*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 83-85.

⁶⁴ See "Special Appendix A," Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1878, no. 10, pp. xxix-xxx.

The second part of the response was the attempt to contain the disease geographically. Doctors were sent out to vaccinate the residents of the adjacent native communities of St. Peter's, Brokenhead, Fort Alexander, and Fairford. The Icelandic reserve was put under quarantine and a *cordon sanitaire* was established at Netley Creek, just inside the northern boundary of the province (see figure 4.1). This boundary line was enforced by a thirteen member military garrison, and was part of a larger quarantine station that also included a hospital. The Health Officers at the Netley Creek station regulated the passage of people and goods from north to south.⁶⁵ Before being allowed to pass individuals were forced to remain at the quarantine station for a fixed period of time and to discard their clothes and other possessions, which were often destroyed. Those who were deemed infected were confined to hospital. This quarantine remained in place until late July 1877.⁶⁶ The final goal of the Board of Health's activities was to protect the northern fur trade in order to avert the institution of an American blockade. The Board sent Health Officers to Dog Head, Berens River, and Norway House to inspect and tag furs bound for the south.⁶⁷

While the above summary accurately describes the activities of the Board of Health during the epidemic, it does not convey the often fractious and contested process by which these measures were adopted and implemented. The official response was devised on an *ad hoc* basis through often acrimonious negotiations between Lt. Governor Morris and the cabinet in distant Ottawa that were frequently punctuated by fundamental

⁶⁵ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B2, Ketcheson Collection, Correspondence, no. 264, Morris to R.W. Scott, 28 June 1877.

⁶⁶ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 23 July 1877.

⁶⁷ "Special Appendix A," Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1878, no. 10, pp. xxx.

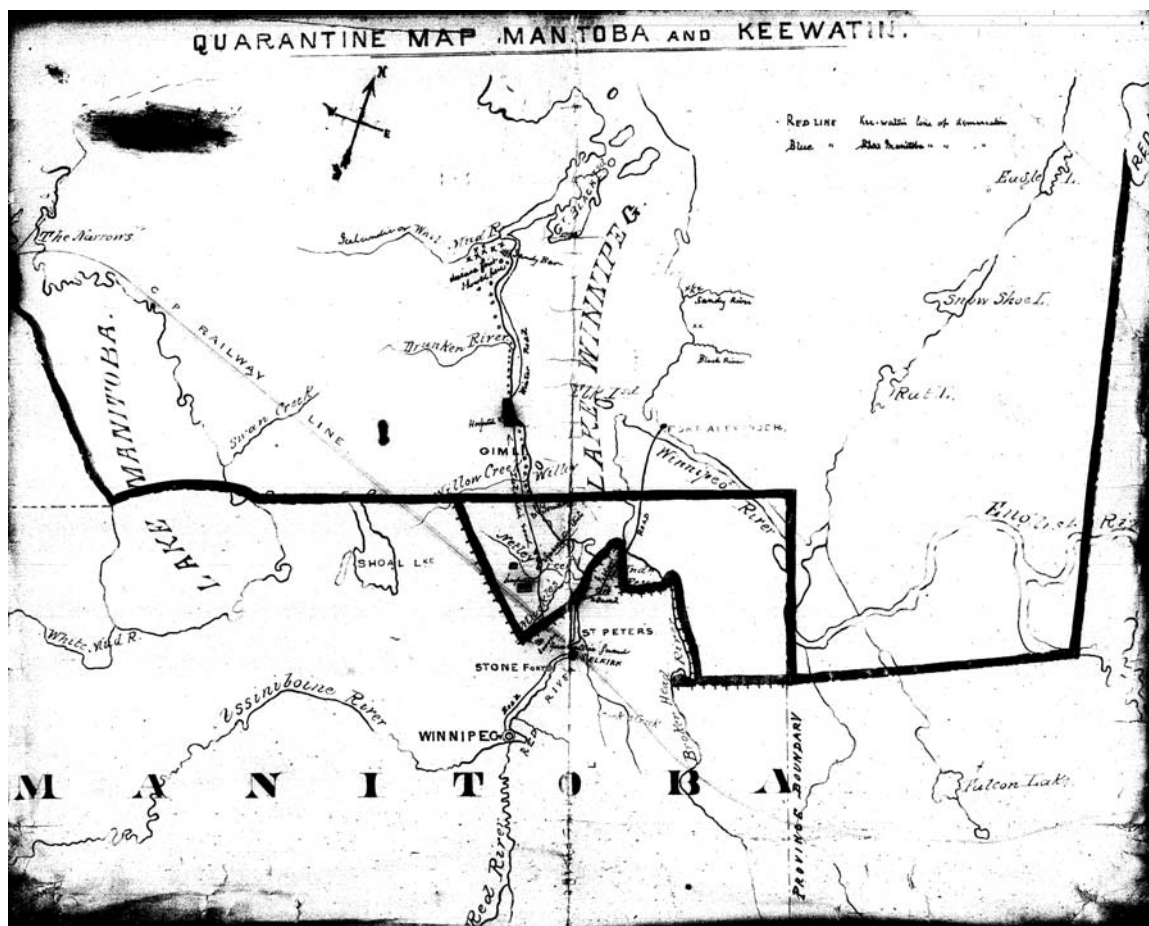


Figure 4.1. “Quarantine Map of Manitoba and Keewatin,” 1877. Source: LAC, RG 15, D II 1, reel T-13868, volume 576, file 178767.

disagreements over jurisdiction and practice and bickering over money.⁶⁸ Yet the Keewatin Board of Health was able to carry out its policies in a way that not only contained the smallpox epidemic but also furthered the Canadian state’s goal of segregating native and settler space. Because the number of government officials on the ground remained limited, implementation of the Board’s directives was dependent on the compliance of local people, secured both through overtly coercive means and the self-regulation of individuals and groups acting in their perceived best interests.

⁶⁸ LAC, Privy Council Office fonds, RG 2 [hereafter RG 2], A 1 a, Minutes, Annexes, and Reports, 1877-0316, “Memorandum from the Minister of the Interior on the Keewatin Smallpox visitation.”

Following from the work of Foucault, historians and sociologists of medicine have traced the process, beginning in the eighteenth century, by which brute force public health measures such as the *cordon sanitaire* were increasingly abandoned in favour of measures aimed at regulating and promoting the health of populations in more subtle and generalized ways. By the 1870s, public health advocates increasingly saw attempts to impose blanket quarantines over larger geographical areas as an obsolete and ineffective practice. The regulation and regimentation of space, objects, and people according to regimes of hygiene was presented as a better alternative.⁷⁰ A central aspect of this new public health was fostering internalized self-discipline, particularly the desire for good health among a subject population.⁷¹ Alison Bashford argues that in colonial contexts, the practice of public health encompassed both the exercise of coercive, sovereign power and new disciplinary modes of governance.⁷² In settler societies such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, migrants and indigenous people continued to be subjected to rigidly enforced regimes of quarantine. By quarantine, Bashford means not only a specific public health practice, but also a wider network of cultural practices involving isolation, containment, and the policing of spaces. In the Lake Winnipeg region, the public health practices of quarantine and sanitation and the spatial practices of treaty, survey and colonization reserves operated hand in hand as apparatuses of governmental power.⁷³ The quarantine and sanitation measures used by the Keewatin Board of Health during the smallpox epidemic belong within Bashford's model. It was the dynamic interaction

⁷⁰ David Armstrong, "Public Health Spaces and the Fabrication of Identity," *Sociology* 27, no. 3 (1993): 352.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene*, 11.

⁷³ Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker, *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001), 39.

between the state's coercive force and disciplinary modes of governance that allowed the new colonial organization of space to take hold around Lake Winnipeg.

The tension between coercion and self-discipline was evident in the debate over the use of a *cordon sanitaire* to prevent travel between Manitoba and the "infected district" of Lake Winnipeg. Lt. Governor Morris and Manitoba Premier R.A. Davis argued that a rigid quarantine, enforced by the military, was essential to prevent the spread of the disease throughout the Northwest, and the death of thousands of Indians. Dominion government officials, by contrast, believed that this measure was unnecessary. Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie argued that responsibility for the maintenance of health rested with the individual. In an encrypted telegram to Morris, Mackenzie stated bluntly: "People themselves must avoid contagion decline expenditure for Quarantine."⁷⁶

Ambivalence about the use of a quarantine also appeared in public discussion. The editor of the *Manitoba Free Press* came out strongly in favour of the measure. "The Dominion has a grave responsibility. Let them keep watch and guard over their colonists in Keewatin. Let the Indians be confined to their reserves and vaccinated. Let the public give the authorities their moral support. What has already been accomplished at Gimli proves that the disease can, humanely speaking, be controlled. Let us all bear in mind that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."⁷⁷ On the other side, *The Manitoba Herald* opined: "the quarantine line is distinctly announced as being made of red tape."⁷⁸ A correspondent to the paper wrote: "Small Pox!! Bah! All we have to do is

⁷⁶ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B3, Ketcheson Collection, Telegram Book 3, no. 14, Mackenzie to Morris, 27 November 1876 and no. 17, Morris to Mackenzie, 27 November 1876.

⁷⁷ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 4 December 1876.

⁷⁸ *Manitoba Herald*, 15 January 1877.

keep ourselves clean, live well, observing the laws by which God governs the world and allow science (medical men) to do the rest and none of us will die from that loathsome disease.”⁷⁹ After the crisis was over a letter writer to the *Free Press* complained that the destruction of clothes and property at the Quarantine Station had been useless. The editor saw fit to rebut this claim, and congratulated the people of Manitoba for adopting and enforcing the quarantine regulations.⁸⁰

The editor was correct in recognizing that the quarantine was successful only because local people chose to enforce it. The area which the quarantine covered was simply too large to have been effectively policed by the small number of soldiers and health officers employed by the Board of Health. Prominent among those who were recognized by Lieutenant Governor Morris for helping to stop the spread of the disease through their strict adherence to the rules were the Ojibwa bands at St. Peter’s (Peguis), Fort Alexander, and Brokenhead.⁸¹ In 1869-70, these bands had been spared from an epidemic that killed more than 2,600 Blood, Peigan, Blackfoot, Cree, and Assiniboines on the Plains.⁸² They therefore recognized the danger posed by smallpox, cut off their communication with people who had been to the Icelandic settlement, and voluntarily confined themselves to their reserves. Keeping the Lake Winnipeg Indians on their reserves was a policy goal of the Dominion government that the emergency itself enabled. While this action served to protect the bands from smallpox, it nonetheless had negative effects on their health. Being confined to their reserve prevented them from

⁷⁹ Ibid., 11 January 1877.

⁸⁰ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 22 June 1877.

⁸¹ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B3, Ketcheson Collection, Telegram Book 3, no. 59, Morris to Scott, 26 February 1877.

⁸² *The Manitoban*, 16 September 1871.

venturing farther out when their local resources failed, as happened with the fishery in the fall of 1876. The chief and councilors of the Fort Alexander reserve wrote to Lt. Governor Morris stating that they required provisions from the government in order to make it through the winter, and that the local Indian agents and Acting Indian Superintendent J.A.N. Provencher had turned a deaf ear to them.⁸³ They also stated that Dr. Willoughby Clark, who was sent to vaccinate them, was doing nothing because he had run out of vaccine matter.⁸⁴ Dr. Clark confirmed the Fort Alexander band's account of poor health owing to causes other than smallpox: "I found a great deal of sickness at this place caused principally by want of proper food and clothing—scrofula and pulmonary complaints predominantly." He recommended that assistance to the band be increased, although there is no evidence that his recommendation was acted upon.⁸⁵

The Icelanders also conformed to the quarantine, though the longer the regime continued, the more their resentment grew. Increasingly the quarantine came to be seen by the colonists as a key source of their continued poverty and ill health. It restricted the flow of supplies into the colony, and therefore contributed to hunger and malnourishment. It also created a greater strain on what resources were available by preventing the able bodied from leaving the reserve to find work in Manitoba. At the end of the epidemic in April 1877, Dr. Henry Beddome reported that the colonists were

⁸³ Shortly after the epidemic, Provencher was embroiled in a scandal over his conduct, especially regarding his provision of supplies to the Indians. See Brian Titley, "Unsteady Debut: J. A. N. Provencher and the Beginnings of Indian Administration in Manitoba," *Prairie Forum* 22, no. 1 (1997): 21-46.

⁸⁴ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, nos. 1381 and 1384, William Pennyfeather to Alexander Morris, 11 December 1876 and 17 December 1876.

⁸⁵ Dr. Willoughby Clark to Provencher, 1 February 1877 in LAC, RG 10, Black Series, reel C-10112, volume 3638, file 7213.

suffering from scurvy and diarrhea.⁸⁶ In early July John Taylor wrote to Ottawa complaining that the quarantine was maintained even though no fresh cases of smallpox had appeared for five months and the colony had been thoroughly disinfected. On 1 August, Minister of Agriculture C.A.P. Pelletier wrote to Morris saying that the quarantine should be removed at once as it was “extremely cruel and unnecessary.”⁸⁷ The military garrison was finally recalled on 21 July, but no notice was sent to the colonists. According to Taylor, they discovered the fact by chance when a group of one hundred young Icelanders, both male and female, set out to force their way through the quarantine barriers.⁸⁸ In a later report Taylor made a scathing attack on the administration of the Keewatin Board of Health: “The oppressive quarantine, so unnecessarily prolonged, has done more serious injury to the colony than can be repaired easily....No quarantine procedures of a like character would have been submitted to for half the time by Canadians.”⁸⁹

The quarantine was only lifted when officials were certain that the Icelandic reserve and its residents had been completely sanitized. This was a protracted process that began with the arrival of the doctors in November 1876 and did not conclude until the following July. Dr. Lynch produced a series of letters and reports that provided the Keewatin Board of Health and the Dominion cabinet with information about the Icelanders’ racial characteristics and modes of living. Lynch believed that centuries of

⁸⁶ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B2, Ketcheson Collection, Correspondence, no. 1458, Henry Beddome to Morris, 13 April 1877.

⁸⁷ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 196, docket 2062, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 July 1877.

⁸⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 198, docket 20421, Taylor to Lowe, 24 July 1877. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 52.

⁸⁹ “Report of Icelandic Agent (Mr. John Taylor),” in Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1878, no. 9, pp. 64, 66.

inbreeding had made them racially degenerate, but thought that they were ultimately redeemable through intermarriage with other more vigorous races.⁹⁰ Lynch claimed that the Icelanders' racial degeneracy was manifested in their indifference to material advancement and their habit of living in over-crowded, dirty and poorly ventilated houses. Many of Lynch's official statements were echoed in a private letter Dr. William Augustus Baldwin wrote to his sister in Toronto. Baldwin said that the Icelanders' poor health was the result of their living "like pigs." The letter conveys his general revulsion at conditions in the Icelandic colony, and includes specific references to the unsanitary behaviour of his patients:

In one house a woman asked me if I would have a cup of coffee. I said yes, as the day was cold, so while I was making up some medicine for a poor sick boy – What do you think I saw the woman do – She no doubt thought that the cup was not clean enough for me, so she licked the cup all around with hir [sic] tongue and then took a towel as balck [sic] as could be – without it being a bit of black coth [sic] and dried with it, and then gave it to me to drink. A nice sight to see for a man who wanted a drink to warm him.⁹¹

When expressing his sympathy for the suffering of the Icelanders, Baldwin cast himself in the role of the man of science and reason attempting to bring order to a disordered set of people badly in need of reform.

The Icelanders both accommodated and resisted the colonizing/sanitizing mission of the Canadian doctors. At least nineteen Icelanders worked as nurses, attendants, and translators in the Gimli hospital and others assisted the medical officers on their travels through the colony.⁹² Dr. Lynch complained that many smallpox patients refused to be

⁹⁰ LAC, RG 6, A 1, volume 28, file 536, Morris to Scott, 21 April 1877.

⁹¹ AM, New Iceland Collection, MG 8 A6-3, Dr. W. Augustus Baldwin to Phoebe Lefoy, 13 March 1877.

⁹² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 179, docket 18531, Taylor to Taché, 15 January 1877.

moved from their homes to the hospital. It was only when attendants entered the homes and threatened to remove them by force that they complied.⁹³ While the Icelanders employed these strategies to meet both the disease emergency and the demands of the government officials, Sigtryggur Jónasson attempted to present an alternate picture of his people's character to officials in Ottawa. He portrayed his countrymen in ways that he knew would be appealing to officials interested in building an orderly settler population. "[They] have kept up a remarkably good spirit during this great calamity, which many who don't know their general disposition nor understand their language call indifference."⁹⁴ In sharp contrast to Dr. Lynch, Jónasson saw the Icelanders as hard-working and deeply committed to progress. By the end of the epidemic, the leaders of the Icelandic colony self-consciously adopted some of the institutional mechanisms of public health as practiced in Canada. One of the first actions of the colony's municipal council was to take measures to disinfect the entire colony with soap and boiling water.⁹⁵ Each *byggð* (settlement) within the colony formed a Board of Health to coordinate these efforts.⁹⁶

In Icelandic settlements, disinfection did not involve the wholesale destruction of bodies and property. This was not the case among the region's Aboriginal communities where burning of bodies, houses, and possessions was practiced at Sandy Bar, Sandy River, Black River, Bad Throat River, and Punk Island. The survivors who witnessed

⁹³ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1377, Lynch to Morris, 3 December 1876.

⁹⁴ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 179, docket 18595, Jónasson to Lowe, 20 January 1877.

⁹⁵ LAC RG 17, A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318, Jónasson to Taylor, 28 March 1877.

⁹⁶ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1458, Beddome to Morris, 13 April 1877.

this activity sometimes allowed it, at other times resisted fiercely. William Drever, one of the doctors' assistants, traveled to Bad Throat River on the east side of the lake to burn or bury the bodies of several members of the Big Island band. He was permitted to bury the body of the chief, Kat-te-pe-nais, but when Drever attempted to burn two others he was chased away.⁹⁷ John Ramsay, one of the few survivors of the Sandy Bar band, helped Dr. Baldwin and Magnús Stefánsson burn the Indian village of Sandy River on the east side of Lake Winnipeg.⁹⁸ However, Ramsay deeply resented the burning of his own village at Sandy Bar, conducted on the orders of Dr. Lynch.⁹⁹ With most of the band members dead, this act had the effect of erasing an important physical vestige of the Sandy Bar band's presence in the Icelandic reserve. It cleared the way for the land to be settled according to the survey of the area that had been completed near the end of 1876. Lynch apparently felt some remorse over this act and advised the government to compensate the surviving members of the band, although this does not appear to have been done. In June 1877 Ramsay traveled to Winnipeg to personally express his aggravation over this act to Lieutenant Governor Morris, but did not receive any guarantees. Morris suggested that Ramsay and the other survivors should leave the Icelandic reserve and settle at Fisher River to the north.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1517, Drever to Morris, 3 August 1877.

⁹⁸ Thorleifur Jóakimsson Jackson, *Frá Austri til Vesturs: Framhald af Landnámssögu Nýja-Íslands* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1921), 81.

⁹⁹ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1455, Lynch to Provencher, 12 April 1877 and no. 1461, Provencher to Morris, 16 April, 1877.

¹⁰⁰ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1503, Meredith to Morris, 13 July 1877.

In the summer of 1876, exactly how Ramsay's people and the Icelanders would resolve their joint claim to the southwest coast of Lake Winnipeg remained an open question. The Sandy Bar and Big Island bands repeatedly protested the appropriation of their land, and refused to abandon their settlement even after their request to form an Indian reserve was denied. The smallpox epidemic resulted in their dispossession, and the appropriation of their land and resources by the Icelanders. This outcome was not only due to the disease's devastating physical effects, but also to the public health measures implemented by the Keewatin Board of Health. The quarantine boundaries that the Board enforced, and which were observed by local people, mirrored the boundaries of land distribution that the Canadian state wished to impose on the region. The crisis gave a new reality to the system of racially-defined reserves, and the rigid separation of native and settler populations. What had once been a dynamic zone of Icelandic-Aboriginal contact became a far more homogeneous Icelandic space.

At the same time, the epidemic also dealt a serious blow to the Icelanders and their settlement. For many families that had hoped for a new beginning in North America, it was a terrible personal tragedy. Many settlers emerged from quarantine impoverished and disillusioned with the government's handling of the crisis. This disillusionment was an important contributing factor to the out-migration that resulted in the colony's near extinction in the early 1880s. Smallpox also accentuated the distance of the Icelanders, both literally and symbolically, from the wider settler community. In ways similar to those applied to Aboriginal people in later decades, the Icelanders' poverty and sickness were interpreted as functions of their racial and cultural inferiority, rather than their specific material circumstances. The 1876-1877 smallpox epidemic is

an example of the linkages between discourses used to justify Aboriginal dispossession and marginalization, and those that sought to bring migrant populations into line with the norms and values of the dominant settler society. It is a reminder of the need to consider European migrants and Aboriginal people together as constituents of the related projects of governance and administration that helped create distinctions between different groups within the colonial population.

Chapter 5
“Principal Projector of the Colony”: The Turbulent Career of
John Taylor, Icelandic Agent

The colonization of the Canadian Northwest after 1870 is not usually linked with the end of slavery in the West Indies during the 1830s. Although both occurred under the broad aegis of British imperial power and each entailed a profound shift in economic, social, and cultural relations built up over centuries, the two societies and their respective transformations seem to share few other characteristics. Whereas a system of plantation agriculture powered by enslaved African labour and tightly controlled by a small planter and mercantile elite predominated in the West Indies, the fur trade in Northwest North America was directed by a tiny and geographically dispersed cadre of European traders working in partnership with a relatively autonomous Aboriginal population.¹ While the end of slavery challenged white minority rule, the waning of the fur trade signaled the advent of a white majority rule through migration and the marginalization of the Aboriginal population. Nonetheless, these two places and events are linked through the strange story of the Barbados-born John Taylor, who became Canada’s “Icelandic Agent.” An examination of his career makes it possible to connect some central processes in the Canadian colonization of the Northwest—migration, resettlement, and assimilation—with discourses around race, freedom, and citizenship that were integral to the emancipation era in the West Indies.

John Taylor was, in succession, a convicted slave trader, Baptist missionary, and Canadian civil servant. In 1840 he was convicted of removing former slaves from

¹ See Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role As Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Sylvia Van Kirk, *"Many Tender Ties": Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing, 1980).

Barbados and selling them back into slavery in Texas.² After being released from prison in 1843 he underwent a religious awakening out of which he vowed to dedicate the remainder of his life to God's service. Around 1848 he moved to Canada West, where he was a member of the local Baptist community in Kingston. He later became a missionary among the lumbermen of Ontario's Haliburton County where he met some recently arrived Icelandic immigrants. In 1875 he advocated on their behalf to the Canadian government and led a delegation to the Northwest to choose a site for an Icelandic reserve. Taylor moved with the Icelanders to the "New Iceland" colony on Lake Winnipeg and, until his death in 1884, was employed by the Department of Agriculture as "Icelandic Agent" responsible for the resettlement of migrant Icelanders in Manitoba and the Northwest Territories.³

Taylor's story has never before been fully reconstructed. In the regional and national histories of several places where he lived, Taylor made enough of an impact to receive at least passing mention. In Barbados, he is noted for being the subject of "a very important and remarkable trial."⁴ In east Texas, stories about "Captain John Taylor" have been passed down in local lore about the illicit African slave trade.⁵ In Manitoba, "Reverend John Taylor" is mentioned as the "missionary from Muskoka" who helped

² *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 26 August 1840.

³ Sigtryggur Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," *Syrpa: Mánaðarrit með myndum* 8, no. 4 (1920): 97-102.

⁴ Robert H. Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados; Comprising a Geographical and Statistical Description of the Island, a Sketch of the Historical Events Since the Settlement, and an Account of its Geology and Natural Productions* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848), 489.

⁵ See Chapter four "Filibustering, Piracy and the African Slave Trade" in W.T. Block, "A History of Jefferson County Texas from Wilderness to Reconstruction" (MA thesis, Lamar University, 1974). Available online at <http://www.wtblock.com/wtblockjr/History%20of%20Jefferson%20County/Introduction.htm>

start a large migration of Icelanders to the region.⁶ Icelandic-Canadian historians have produced the most thorough treatments of Taylor's life, but his conviction for slave trading was previously either unknown or intentionally omitted.⁷ The purpose of this chapter is to examine the full scope of Taylor's life in order to better understand his actions as Icelandic Agent in the Canadian Northwest.

The fact that a man with such a common name was, over the course of the nineteenth-century, able to leave behind a troubled past and reinvent himself in a new context is not particularly surprising.⁸ What is significant about Taylor's career is the opportunity it provides for reinterpreting an idiosyncratic aspect of western Canadian history—the existence of an Icelandic immigrant reserve—as having been shaped by ideas, practices, and debates originating in unexpected places outside the formal boundaries of nation and ethnic community.⁹ However, reconciling the John Taylor of Barbados with the John Taylor of New Iceland is not at first glance an easy task. The sources from these two locales paint dramatically different pictures of him. According to the testimony of the people he was convicted of selling into slavery, Taylor was a cruel and deceitful man who callously used them for his own personal gain;¹⁰ the Icelanders, by contrast, saw him as a flawed, but fundamentally good man, and were impressed by

⁶ W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 162.

⁷ Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor."; Wilhelm Kristjanson, "John Taylor and the Pioneer Icelandic Settlement in Manitoba and his Plea on Behalf of the Persecuted Jewish People," *Manitoba Historical Society Transactions Series 3*, no. 32 (1975-76): 33-41.

⁸ See Kirsten McKenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney & Cape Town, 1820-1850* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004).

⁹ See David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁰ *Barbadian*, 1 July 1840.

his deeply held religious views and his humanitarianism.¹¹ How was this transition possible? What continuity, if any, was there between the old and new guises of John Taylor?

As he moved from master to missionary to agent, Taylor maintained a hierarchical understanding of race and culture in which he, along with other educated white British men, occupied the pinnacle position. Over time he incorporated a liberal faith in the potential of subordinate peoples to be remade in his own image as devout, loyal, and productive subjects that mirrored the paternalistic discourses of Baptist anti-slavery missionaries.¹² Taylor saw the Icelanders as struggling to escape centuries of poverty and backwardness, and believed that his mission in New Iceland was to develop “a Canadian population” who spoke English, observed British customs, and who were imbued with a commitment to the liberal ideals of material progress, market production, and self-government.¹³ However, his inclusionary view of the Icelanders was contingent on both their whiteness and their obedience to his authority.¹⁴ Unlike his Baptist co-religionists earlier in the century, Taylor does not appear to have believed that racial equality was possible. His exclusionary tactics with New Iceland's Aboriginal population were symptomatic of the hardening of racial categories in the British Empire after mid-

¹¹ See, for example, the reminiscences of Símon Símonarson, who was among New Iceland's first settlers. University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections [hereafter UMASC], Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04).

¹² See Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹³ Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17 [hereafter RG 17], “General Correspondence” series [hereafter A I 1], volume 232, docket 23807, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 December 1878.

¹⁴ On the inclusionary pretensions and exclusionary practices of British liberalism toward subject populations, see Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

century. He had more faith in the Icelanders, but nonetheless proved to have an ambivalent view of personal liberty that exposed his roots as the product of a slave society. When his authority was challenged he attempted to limit the Icelanders' individual freedom, leading some settlers to wonder if they were to become slaves in the Northwest.¹⁵ Taylor's unusual career thus connects key themes in the histories of the West Indies and the Canadian Northwest.

* * *

John Taylor was born 2 March 1813, the second oldest of at least ten children born to Richard Taylor, a Deputy in the Commissariat Office of the British Navy, and Elizabeth Mehetabel Jones.¹⁶ The family lived at Enmore, a sixteen-acre property in St. Michael's parish on the outskirts of Barbados's capital, Bridgetown. The Taylors were not among the island's planter elite, but were considered respectable members of white society. According to contemporary slave registers, the family owned twenty-eight slaves who mostly worked as house servants.¹⁷ Abel Clinckett, editor of the conservative newspaper *the Barbadian*, described Richard Taylor as a family man of "unreproachable character" who had served the Crown "with exemplary fidelity and honour" for thirty years.¹⁸ The senior Taylor's work in the Commissariat Office, which involved supplying the navy's ships, was a position that entailed close business dealings with the island's

¹⁵ *Framfari [Progressive]*, 29 March 1879, pp. 526-528. Page numbers are for the published English translation of the newspaper. See George Houser, ed. *Framfari: 1877 to 1880* (Gimli, MB: Gimli Chapter Icelandic National League of North America, 1986).

¹⁶ Mary Hearn, "The Hearn Family Story," (n.d.).

¹⁷ The National Archives [United Kingdom; hereafter TNA], T71, Office of Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission: Records. Barbados, St. Michael Parish, 1834.

¹⁸ *Barbadian*, 1 July 1840.

merchants.¹⁹ Richard Taylor's connections helped John secure positions as a clerk with various merchant houses and in the Commissariat Office as a young man.²⁰ Apart from this, very little is known about John Taylor's early life in Barbados. According to his friend and Assistant Icelandic Agent Sigtryggur Jónasson, Taylor was educated at the island's "Latin School", before attending university in Halifax, where he studied theology and briefly considered ordination in the Anglican priesthood.²¹

As Taylor grew to adulthood, the anti-slavery movement and Afro-Barbadian resistance were slowly eroding the slave society that he had been born into. The Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, under which he would later be convicted, was passed in 1807. In 1816, a month after his third birthday, a major slave rebellion convulsed the island and terrified the white population. By his tenth birthday Barbadian whites had found a scapegoat for Afro-Barbadian resistance; the Methodist Chapel of William Shrewsbury was torched by an angry mob in 1823.²² However, by this time the anti-slavery forces in the metropole had gained a decisive advantage, and the imperial government formally adopted a policy of amelioration. The end of slavery in 1834 came on the heels of Taylor's twenty-first birthday. Full emancipation for the formerly enslaved Barbadians had to wait until 1 August 1838 when the quasi-slavery apprenticeship system was dismantled. On that historic day, eight Afro-Barbadians who had left the island under John Taylor's leadership remained enslaved in Texas.

¹⁹ Pedro L. V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City: Bridgetown, Barbados, 1680-1834* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 69.

²⁰ TNA, CO 28/134/37 No. 61, folios 392-410.

²¹ Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," 99. Thus far I have been unable to determine which institution in Nova Scotia Taylor attended.

²² See chapters 4 and 5 in David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Taylor made the fateful decision to move to Texas in 1835 "for the purpose of engaging there in mercantile as well as other pursuits."²³ Taylor's attorney claimed his client had heard glowing accounts of Texas while doing business in the United States.²⁴ In the mid-1830s, Texas, then a province of Mexico, was attracting considerable numbers of American settlers. Many of these migrants were slave owners from the southern states who brought their slaves with them, even though chattel slavery had been abolished in Mexico in 1829.²⁵ Americans were able to perpetuate the slave system by manipulating Mexican laws around indentured servitude and debt peonage. Slave-owners drew up indenture contracts under terms that made it virtually impossible for the slave to fulfill them, either because of the duration of the contract or the cash repayment required. Mexican authorities made efforts to end this practice but to little effect; black indentured servants were treated no differently than if they were slaves—they were bought and sold, hired out and bequeathed in wills.²⁶ Contemporary settler guides contained advice on how to "evade the general law of abolition" through indenture contracts.²⁷ Prior to leaving Barbados, Taylor and his partner Thomas Ames signed a number of their servants to indenture contracts. Edward Whittaker, a shoemaker, testified that Taylor had given him the money to buy out his apprenticeship.²⁸ In return Whittaker signed an indenture

²³ "The Humble Petition of John Taylor, of the Island of Barbados, to the Secretary of State for these Colonies" in *Barbadian*, 8 July 1840.

²⁴ *West Indian*, 6 July 1840.

²⁵ Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press 1989), 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-24, 31-32.

²⁷ Anonymous, *A Visit to Texas: Being the Journal of a Traveller through those parts most interesting to American Settlers, with a description of scenery, habits, etc.* (New York: Goodrich & Wiley, 1834), 10-11.

²⁸ *West Indian*, 2 July 1840. Under the apprenticeship system, apprenticed laborers had the option of buying out their apprenticeship.

to serve Taylor and Ames “in this and other places” for a period of four years for \$40 per year.²⁹

There is some indication that even if Taylor didn’t set out from Barbados with the intention of selling his servants as slaves, he at least was aware that traveling to Texas with Afro-Barbadians was an enterprise of dubious legality. In his April 1837 petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Taylor stated that his servants had received permission to travel from the Secretary’s Office in Barbados “as the law directs.”³⁰ However, he neglected to mention *where* they had been given permission to travel to. William Gunsell testified that Taylor instructed him not to tell the Secretary where they were going, and if asked was to reply they were going to the Leeward Islands.³¹ Gunsell also testified that he and the other black people were hidden below deck during a stop in Grenada and at sea when they encountered a United States Naval ship.³² Taylor’s 1835 journey conforms to precisely the same pattern as was followed by other slave traders in the region. Fast, ocean going cargo vessels arrived in Galveston Bay, where slaves were transferred to smaller vessels that carried them up through the river system to places where they could be sold.³³ Taylor’s party landed at Bolivar Point, at the entrance to Galveston Bay, and camped there before traveling east along the coast to the Sabine Pass, near the border with Louisiana.³⁴

²⁹ *Barbadian*, 4 July 1840.

³⁰ "The Humble Petition of John Taylor, of the Island of Barbados, to the Secretary of State for these Colonies" in *Barbadian*, 8 July 1840.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1 July 1840.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Fred Lee McGhee, "The Black Crop: Slavery and Slave Trading in Nineteenth Century Texas." (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2000), 110.

³⁴ "The Humble Petition of John Taylor of the Island of Barbados, to the Secretary of State for these Colonies," in *West Indian*, 6 July 1840.

Taylor could hardly have picked a more turbulent time to relocate to Texas. He arrived during the revolutionary war between the Mexican government and American settlers, known as Texians, that ultimately resulted in the creation of the Republic of Texas in March 1836. The Texas Revolution had important consequences for the legal status of the black servants that Taylor brought with him. On 2 December 1835, just days before their arrival, the Beaumont committee of safety wrote to the Texian leadership expressing their concern that the presence of free blacks in Texas could potentially inflame the slave population and help ignite a revolt.³⁵ In response, the revolutionary council adopted an ordinance making it illegal “for any free negro or mulatto to come within the limits of Texas.”³⁶ In February 1836, Taylor and his party were arrested by Samuel Rogers, Collector of Customs at Beaumont, and were detained for over a month.³⁷ In a sworn deposition, April Lashley, one of Taylor’s servants, stated that Rogers told Taylor the Texian government “did not allow free colored men to stay in the place.” As a result, Taylor asked Lashley and the others to sign on as his slaves, but they refused.³⁸ In the meantime, the Texian government had formally reintroduced slavery, “All persons of color who were slaves for life, previous to their emigration to Texas, and who are now held as bonded servants or otherwise, shall remain in the like state of servitude in which they would have been held in the country from which they came.”³⁹ After his release from custody, Taylor transferred the indenture contracts of his nine

³⁵ Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865*, 42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁷ *West Indian*, 9 July 1840.

³⁸ TNA, CO 28/128/ 58 f. 299.

³⁹ quoted in Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865*, 45.

servants to several different Texians in return for cash. Taylor claimed that he had done this at his servants' request, but this was either contradicted or qualified by the people themselves. Edward Whittaker testified he had asked Taylor to transfer his contract to a man named William Moore out of fear that Moore would "blow his brains out" and after receiving fifty lashes.⁴⁰

Taylor's case first came to the attention of the British government in April 1837. After consulting with Sir Evan MacGregor, Governor General of the Windward Islands, Taylor sent a petition to Lord Glenelg, Secretary of State for the Colonies, asking that the eight black and coloured persons be restored to liberty "to which [they] are justly entitled, as British subjects" and that the government reimburse him for his financial losses.⁴¹ The Colonial Office referred the case to the Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston, who took a skeptical view of Taylor's intentions.⁴² Over a year passed without any action from London, and Taylor became increasingly anxious; in January 1839, he wrote to MacGregor that he was "scandalized in the community & injured in the opinion of many of my friends" as a result of the Texas affair becoming widely known on the island.⁴³ By this time, prosecuting Taylor was under consideration. Barbados's Attorney General informed the Colonial Office, "doubt exists whether he has not in these transactions rendered himself liable to a prosecution for a breach of the Act of Parliament for the Abolition of the Slave Trade."⁴⁴ In October 1839, April Lashley arrived back in Bridgetown after a harrowing escape from Texas. According to his mother, April

⁴⁰ *Barbadian*, 1 July 1840.

⁴¹ The Humble Petition of John Taylor, of the Island of Barbados, to the Secretary of State for these Colonies, 15 April 1837 quoted in *Barbadian*, 8 July 1840.

⁴² *West Indian*, 6 July 1840.

⁴³ TNA, CO 28/127/12 f. 103-104.

⁴⁴ *West Indian*, 6 July 1840.

confronted Taylor; “Mass John, what did you sell me for?”—Taylor answered, “Couldn’t do better, April; I had the schooner expenses to pay....”⁴⁵ On the strength of April’s deposition, Taylor was arrested and committed to jail.⁴⁶ Early in 1840, the British government sent Captain Hamilton, one of the special magistrates appointed to adjudicate disputes between freed slaves and their former masters, to Texas to recover the people and gather evidence for the case against Taylor.⁴⁷ Hamilton was only able to recover five of the eight missing people; Samuel McIntosh and Thomasin Ann, as well as Taylor’s white servant Henry Foderingham, were missing and believed to be dead.⁴⁸

The trial at the end of June 1840 was a sensational event that attracted considerable attention in Barbados and was noted in the anti-slavery press in England. There was little enthusiasm for prosecuting Taylor among the white population. The editor of the planter newspaper the *Barbadian*, opined that he was reluctant to report on the trial of the “unfortunate young man” owing both to the respectability of his parents and because it would be “eagerly seized upon by the Anti-Colonial faction in England who take advantage of any isolated case to fulminate their cruel and sweeping charges against West Indians who are not so fortunate to be of African descent.”⁴⁹ Taylor’s defense focused on the fact that he had voluntarily approached the government to secure the release of the people. His lawyer attempted to portray him as respectable young man and even “a perfect martyr in the cause of liberty.”⁵⁰ But in spite of the widespread sympathy for Taylor among the white population, the jury had little choice but to convict

⁴⁵ *Barbadian*, 1 July 1840.

⁴⁶ TNA, CO 28/128/ 58 f. 291.

⁴⁷ TNA, CO 28/143/69 f. 298-317.

⁴⁸ *Barbadian*, 1 July 1840.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1840.

him; the imperial government was watching, and based on both the documentary evidence and testimony of the survivors there was little doubt that Taylor had broken the law; his servants had received no wages, some had been tortured and threatened with death, and they had been worked and kept in conditions similar to other slaves. Taylor was convicted and sentenced to transportation for a term of fourteen years. Shortly afterwards, a petition for clemency was sent to the Colonial Secretary bearing the signatures of several members of the Barbados Assembly, Anglican Rectors and clergymen, prominent planters, barristers, Justices of the Peace, and even the Jury that convicted him.⁵¹ As a result of this and other representations, the sentence was eventually commuted from transportation to New South Wales to three years imprisonment in Barbados.⁵² In 1841, Taylor was one of only three white prisoners in the common jail in Bridgetown, out of a total prison population of 172.⁵³ In March 1843, Governor Sir Charles Grey released Taylor after having served three years and three months imprisonment.⁵⁴ Taylor next went to England where he remained for several years working as a clerk in a mercantile firm.⁵⁵

Taylor had grown up and been educated in the Church of England, but his difficulties led him to rethink his relationship with God, first through reading non-conformist teachings and finally, after emigration to Canada, conversion to the Baptist faith. Two documents written by Taylor in the 1840s describe this evolution in his religious thinking. The first recounts an episode from his time in Texas: “[In] December

⁵¹ TNA, CO 28/134/47 No. 72, folios 450-459.

⁵² TNA, CO 28/135/26 f. 193-196.

⁵³ Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados*, 138.

⁵⁴ TNA, CO 28/156/13 f. 126-137.

⁵⁵ Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," 99.

in the year 1837, I, ...pondering on my misfortunes and perplexed with my business, thought I saw mentally a vision which showed me the way to Heaven and the abode of men in this world. It has given me great comfort and I therefore write it down to assist my memory in future days.”⁵⁶ In Taylor’s vision there was a pool of water representing the earth, encased in a round tent, at the top of which was an opening through which glowed an exquisite light. “To this light men who loved God looked constantly whilst men who sought after wealth dived below...to where the greatest wealth was and soon got so entangled with the weirs below that they could not regain the light of Heaven...”⁵⁷ Taylor believed that through this vision, God had shown him the incompatibility of a search for wealth with a search for personal salvation.

His stint in prison undoubtedly gave him ample opportunity for further religious reflection; in 1840 the prison chaplain petitioned for Taylor’s release, noting his regular attendance at divine services.⁵⁸ However, it wasn’t until after his near-death in a terrible storm at sea on his way to England, that Taylor made a commitment to spend the remainder of his days as a servant of God. A personal “covenant of faith” signed in the Chapel-of-Ease in Seymour St. London in June 1844, details his personal religious awakening. He was inspired to take this step after reading *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), a highly influential book by the English non-conformist Philip Doddridge.⁵⁹ Taylor recounted his personal struggle to become “one of God’s

⁵⁶ John Taylor manuscript collection in the possession of the family of the late Donna Skardal, Baldur, Manitoba (hereafter Skardal Mss), John Taylor, n.d.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ TNA, CO 28/134/47 No. 72, f. 455.

⁵⁹ See Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul: Illustrated in a Course of Serious and Practical Addresses, Suited to Persons of Every*

people” by overcoming the cycle of sin and repentance that had characterized his life. His own moral weakness had led him to steadily abandon attempts to resist temptation, until “it pleased the all wise God to lay his afflicting hand upon me....” However, Taylor did not simply believe that he had suffered the wrath of a vengeful God; he had also been given an opening to escape his old ways and be reborn, stronger and fortified by God’s love.

In the midst of all my troubles...the Almighty kept me from falling into the utmost extremity of despair, although he would not remove his heavy hand from off me for several long years, during which I received very gradually small portions of that strength which I had formerly besought him to give me, until at length I found myself enabled by a power not mine own, to resist and to overcome those sins which I had been accustomed to fall almost as often as spoiled by their temptation.⁶⁰

Taylor’s never says explicitly what sins he has committed, or what events transpired that led him to these conclusions. However, the document provides a personal view into his moral universe and an understanding of his relationship with God. Both the account of his 1837 vision, and 1844 covenant were not meant for public consumption; they were private documents that he kept with him, in a secret compartment of his traveling writing desk for the rest of his life. The commitment to become God’s servant that he made that day in the chapel on Seymour Street in London moved his life in the direction that would ultimately lead to his appointment as Icelandic Agent in 1875.

Around 1848 John and his younger brother William moved to Kingston, Canada West and were later joined by their parents and three of their siblings. Comparatively little is known about Taylor’s life after his arrival in Canada around 1848. He and his

Character and Circumstance: With a Devout Meditation, or Prayer, Subjoined to Each Chapter (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977 [1745]).

⁶⁰ Skardal Mss, John Taylor, Affirmation of Faith, London, 3 June 1844.

family initially settled near Kingston, in the vicinity of Ernestown in Lennox & Addington County. According to the 1851 Canada census, John Taylor had a small farm and taught in a grammar school, and was married to Elizabeth Haines, a member of a prominent Baptist family.⁶¹ Taylor had by this time also formally adopted the Baptist faith. Sometime after 1850, John and Elizabeth moved to Peterborough where John operated a store in partnership with his brother-in-law. Although they had no children of their own, after 1864 the couple raised Jane and Susannah, the two youngest daughters of John's brother William.⁶²

It was around this time that Taylor renewed his commitment to place himself in God's service. For a time he was a "colporteur"—essentially a travelling Bible salesman—and was probably affiliated with the Upper Canada branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society.⁶³ Between 1870 and 1875 Taylor devoted most of his time to missionary work for the Baptist church. He relocated his family north from Peterborough to Dysart Township, part of a new settlement promoted by the Canadian Land and Emigration Company in Haliburton County.⁶⁴ His mission field was the region's lumber camps and he aimed to earn converts from among the rough-and-tumble "shantymen"

⁶¹ Her father George H. Haines was a founder of the Kingston Baptist Church. See *the Register* [Montréal], 2 February 1842.

⁶² Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," 99, 102.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Icelandic-Canadian sources usually refer to the organization that John Taylor was affiliated with as the "British-Canadian Bible Society". I have been unable to find any organization by that name. However the Upper Canada Bible Society, a branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society, was providing grants in support of "colportage among the shantymen in the lumbercamps" during this period. See Edward C. Woodley, *The Bible in Canada* (Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1953), 87.

⁶⁴ Leopolda z Lobkowicz Dobrzensky, *Fragments of a Dream: Pioneering in Dysart Township and Haliburton Village* (Haliburton, ON: Municipality of Dysart, 1985), 229.

toiling in the forests. It was in this capacity that he first encountered some of the Icelandic immigrants who had arrived in Ontario in 1874.⁶⁵

Taylor's original purpose in approaching the government on behalf of the Icelanders was not to found an Icelandic colony in the Northwest, but rather an "industrial farm" in the centre of the region of Ontario where the provincial government had encouraged Icelandic settlement. In letters to the *Montreal Daily Witness* and to Governor General Lord Dufferin, Taylor asserted that the main barrier to the Icelanders becoming "independent and self-supporting" citizens was their ignorance of the language and culture of the host society. His remedy was to further isolate them in an agrarian institution where they would be placed under the supervision of "some knowledgeable person" whose instruction would transform them from backward foreigners into prosperous Canadians. "Employment and useful education could there be given to all who require it, and general information and assistance rendered in the selection of their lots and mode of procedure in clearing and cultivating them."⁶⁶ This plan got a cool reception in Ottawa, but government officials were nonetheless interested in promoting Icelandic immigration and settlement. The Ministers of Agriculture and Interior directed Taylor to form a delegation of Icelanders to search out a site for an Icelandic colony in Manitoba or the North-west Territories.⁶⁷

In July 1875 Taylor and the "Icelandic Deputation" selected a tract of land on the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg that was roughly half the size of his native

⁶⁵ Taylor to Lord Dufferin, 12 April 1875, included in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 131, docket 13750, Harry Moody, Governor's General's Office, to the Minister of Agriculture, 16 April 1875.

⁶⁶ *Daily Witness* [Montréal], 8 April 1875.

⁶⁷ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 315, docket 14103, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 5 June 1875.

Barbados.⁶⁸ Taylor received an eight-month appointment as “Icelandic Agent” that ultimately stretched into nine years. Typical for civil service appointments in this period, Taylor’s principal qualification for the position was that he had friends in the government.⁶⁹ As a result, Taylor, then in his middle sixties, was given broad responsibility for a colony that at its peak contained upwards of 1,500 people. Although the land was reserved exclusively for Icelanders, an exception was made in the case of Taylor’s own extended family. John and Elizabeth Taylor’s household in the village of Gimli included their teenage nieces Caroline (Carrie), Jane, and Susannah (Susie). The girls’ father, William Stuart Taylor, along with their stepmother and three half siblings, settled on a homestead called “Foresthme” south of Gimli. Later, two sons of John and William’s sister Jane Hearn, William Taylor Hearn and John Hearn, also settled on the Icelandic reserve.⁷⁰ In short, “Uncle John” was not only building a colony of Icelanders but also a colony of Taylors. Símon Símonarson perceived that distinctions were made between the “better-class” of people—Taylor’s family and the few Icelanders who could speak English—and the majority of the settlers. Símon alleged that those who were “on

⁶⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, docket 14663, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 August 1875.

⁶⁹ John Taylor’s principal contacts in Ottawa were probably John Bertram and James Hall, the Liberal MPs for Peterborough East & West. In September 1875, both men wrote the Minister of Agriculture enthusiastically supporting Taylor’s appointment as Icelandic Agent (see LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 140, dockets 14686 & 14688). Taylor may have had other contacts in cabinet or the upper echelons of the civil service; Wilhelm Kristjanson claimed that it was the “Minister of Immigration” who had been “a fellow student of John Taylor’s at Oxford” (see Kristjanson, “John Taylor,” 35). However, there was no Minister of Immigration during this period; responsibility for immigration fell under the Agriculture portfolio. In 1875 the Minister was Luc Letellier de St. Just and the Deputy Minister was J.C. Taché, both francophones who Taylor probably would not have attended school with. It is more likely that Taylor’s upper level contact was John Lowe, Secretary of the Department.

⁷⁰ Hearn, “The Hearn Family Story.”

the most intimate terms with Taylor” received preferential treatment, particularly when it came to selecting land.⁷¹ Whether this was the case or not, Taylor clearly intended to place himself literally at the centre of life in the colony. Shortly after arrival he hired the Icelanders to build him a two-storey house with double walls in the centre of Gimli, from which he conducted the business of his agency.⁷²

Although he was a political appointee, John Taylor’s position was no sinecure. Officials in the Department of Agriculture probably considered the role of Icelandic Agent to be akin to the hard-working “inland” agents who provided logistical and material support to new immigrants, and reported to the government on the conditions in newly settled districts.⁷³ Taylor was instructed to “assist the Icelanders in their first settlement” primarily by distributing various forms of government aid.⁷⁴ However, in the context of a new and relatively isolated colony, that basic directive came to encompass an extensive list of duties. Taylor arranged for the purchase, transport and distribution of food, seed, implements, livestock and other necessities. Since most of this was done from a government loan to be repaid, he was required to keep detailed accounts of what each Icelandic family owed. The arrival of new groups of immigrants meant he had to arrange for their transport from Winnipeg and ensure that their basic needs were met after arrival in the colony. In the absence of a Dominion Lands Office in the region, he was instructed to register the settlers’ homesteads, and when the government agreed to construct a road to connect the Icelandic reserve with Manitoba in 1876, Taylor was

⁷¹ UMASC, Mss 34 (A.80-04), Símon Símonarson fonds.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Norman P. Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 40.

⁷⁴ LAC, RG 17, “General Letterbooks” series [hereafter A-I-2], volume 1513, p. 3, Lowe to Taylor, 15 September 1875.

given the additional task of jointly overseeing the project and the paying of the workers. He also looked out for the health of the colonists, and arranged for medical assistance during frequent disease outbreaks. The position required Taylor to carry out a voluminous correspondence with government officials in both Ottawa and Winnipeg that was often frustratingly slow, due to poor communications. Taylor delegated work to his Assistant Agent Sigtryggur Jónasson and relied heavily on his friend Friðjón Friðriksson as his interpreter, since he did not understand the Icelandic language. However, ultimate responsibility for the colony's welfare and material progress rested squarely on Taylor's shoulders.

That responsibility was a heavy one; during the first five years of its existence, New Iceland was almost perpetually in crisis. Malnutrition and near starvation in the first winter were followed by a devastating smallpox epidemic in the second that resulted in the colony being placed under a rigid quarantine for seven months.⁷⁵ Chronic wet weather and flooding over several summers ruined crops and dashed hopes of agricultural progress. A divisive religious controversy between two competing Lutheran pastors—which was as much about the colony's future as it was about articles of faith—caused a profound split among the colonists.⁷⁶ Throughout New Iceland's manifold crises, Taylor set priorities for the settlement—such as the formation of a militia company—that seem strangely out of touch with reality. Even when the situation was at its blackest, he used his position as agent to work toward the goal of assimilating the Icelanders. He did this

⁷⁵ See Chapter 4 and Ryan C. Eyford, "Quarantined within a New Colonial Order: The 1876-1877 Lake Winnipeg Smallpox Epidemic," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17 (2006): 57-78.

⁷⁶ See Jónas Þór, "A Religious Controversy Among Icelandic Immigrants in North America, 1874-1880" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1980).

because he considered assimilation and material progress to be inextricably linked. In his view, the ultimate success of the colonization project hinged on building a settler community that adhered to his notions of the proper class, gender and racial order. Over time, he saw this goal coming into view: “A perfect identification in all respects with our people will eventually take place, so that whether by birth or assimilation, a Canadian population is being rapidly developed here.”⁷⁷ In this way, he believed that the experiment would meet both the larger goals of the Canadian government's colonial project in the Northwest, and the Icelanders' desire to build a prosperous settler community.

Taylor thus interpreted his role as agent in much more expansive terms than did his superiors in the Department of Agriculture. He sought to exercise wide ranging paternal authority over the settlement and the lives of its inhabitants. In addition to acting as a conduit of government power, Taylor also aspired to religious, moral, and even legal authority. Although he had formally exchanged the role of Baptist missionary for that of civil servant, his deeply held religious views led him to interpret events as having been guided by divine providence. In July 1875, he wrote in his exploration journal, “...if the Lord shall plant the colony of Icelanders here, may there never be wanting among them [sic] true and devoted hearts to serve the living God.”⁷⁸ The Icelanders perceived that Taylor saw himself as a Moses figure destined to guide them to their promised land. On the journey to the Northwest in fall of 1875, Taylor preached a sermon drawn from the Book of Exodus: “Behold I send an angel before thee to keep thee in the way, and to

⁷⁷ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 232, docket 23807, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 December 1878.

⁷⁸ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 3 August 1875.

bring thee into the place which I have prepared.”⁷⁹ During the first winter, when there was no Icelandic pastor in the colony, Taylor conducted Sunday services with the assistance of his translator Friðriksson.⁸⁰ Ólafur Ólafsson from Espihóll wrote to his friend Rev. Jón Bjarnason that although Taylor fervently wanted to become the Icelanders’ pastor, the people largely rejected him because of differences in religious practice between Taylor’s Baptist beliefs and their Icelandic Lutheranism. Of particular importance to the settlers was the baptism of children, a rite that Taylor refused to perform.⁸¹

But while Taylor shied away from the infant baptism, he was generally willing to play a role in regulating relations of gender and family among the colonists. Shortly after arrival in the colony he sought out an appointment as Justice of the Peace in order to ensure that unions between Icelandic couples observed the bounds of legality and moral propriety.⁸² He also used his powers as Justice of the Peace to arrange informal adoptions. John and Elizabeth Taylor were themselves part of this process; they adopted two baby girls born to Sigurlaug Björnsdóttir and Kristmundur Benjamínsson—a poor couple who already had a large family.⁸³ One of the two girls, Rannveig Sigríður Kristmundsdóttir, whom the Taylors renamed Rose, survived and was raised to adulthood

⁷⁹ Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, vol. 2 (Winnipeg: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1943), 336; Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Winnipeg: Viking Press, 1967), 115.

⁸⁰ UMASC Mss 34 (A.80-04), Símon Símonarson fonds.

⁸¹ Landsbókasafn Íslands [National Library of Iceland; hereafter Lbs.] 4390, 4to, Ólafur Ólafsson frá Espihóli to Séra Jón Bjarnason, 13 January 1876.

⁸² AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Letterbook 'M', no. 306, Morris to Edward Blake, 5 November 1875.

⁸³ *Framfari*, 14 May 1879, p. 569.

as John and Elizabeth's own daughter.⁸⁴ In general, the Taylor family presented themselves as a model properly ordered English middle-class family life for the Icelanders to emulate.

With its religious underpinnings and emphasis on performing proper gender roles, the Icelandic reserve was in essence a type of mission community in which the paternalistic missionary/agent oversaw a wide-ranging civilizing mission. It was in this respect not entirely dissimilar from the free villages that Baptist missionaries established for former slaves in Jamaica and other West Indian islands after emancipation.⁸⁵ Taylor's plan for the Icelanders echoed the abolitionists' dreams for the future of the freed slaves; they would become thrifty, industrious and independent commodity producers, exercising the full rights, privileges and obligations of British subjects. He considered himself to be taking the "hardy and able bodied people of Iceland," whom he conceded were "rather deficient on their first arrival," and demonstrating "their fitness for becoming good settlers and peaceable citizens."⁸⁶

To this end, Taylor worked to establish the basic structures of governance and civil society that he was familiar with: a school, a post office, a rudimentary judicial system, a police force, a militia unit, a system of municipal government and a newspaper. Only nine days after their arrival in the colony Taylor wrote to Alexander Morris, Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba and the North-west Territories, asking for the creation

⁸⁴ Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," 102.

⁸⁵ See Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 120-39.

⁸⁶ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 358, docket 38365, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 1 January 1883.

of a “national school...connected with the regular educational system of Canada.”⁸⁷ Although government support for the school never arrived, it was nonetheless established, with Carrie Taylor as its teacher. A few days later Taylor wrote to Morris requesting the appointment of himself and Ólafur Ólafsson as Justices of the Peace, Páll Jóhannesson as constable, and asking that the Icelanders be allowed to form a volunteer militia unit.⁸⁸ The introduction of basic structures of democratic local government began in January 1876 with the election of the five-member *bæjarnefnd* (village council), of which Taylor was himself a member.⁸⁹ In the colony’s second year, Taylor pushed for a more permanent system of municipal government and district school boards. He argued that these structures were vitally necessary in “bringing the Icelanders to a practical knowledge and possession of our civil and political privileges, so that they may acquire and make use of the position of naturalized British subjects at as early a period as possible.”⁹⁰

However, while Taylor espoused similar rhetoric to his Baptist co-religionists earlier in the century, his mission was quite different with respect to race. The Icelandic reserve was founded during a period when the earlier faith in the basic equality and perfectibility of humanity was being replaced by a more rigid biological determinism that drew sharp distinctions between the relative capabilities of different races. Essentially, Taylor was working to demonstrate that the Icelanders could claim the full privileges of

⁸⁷ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1147, Taylor to Morris, 30 October 1875.

⁸⁸ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Letterbook 'M', no. 306, Morris to Edward Blake, 5 November 1875.

⁸⁹ Lbs. 4390, 4to, Ólafur Ólafsson frá Espihóli to Séra Jón Bjarnason, 13 January 1876.

⁹⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 173, docket 17911, Taylor to Lowe, 28 November 1876.

whiteness. Taylor's mission represents the unification of the abolitionist's civilizing mission with planter's understanding of a hierarchical racial order. In this respect Taylor was essentially the settler counterpart to another paternalistic functionary of the Canadian colonial state—the Indian Agent. Like the agents working on Indian reserves around Lake Winnipeg, Taylor was an outsider seeking to encourage the values of thrift, industry and self-sufficiency in a group of people constructed as backward and dependent; both types of agents relied on similar assimilative rhetoric to describe the future relationship of the people to Anglo-Canadians.⁹¹ But while Taylor's activities paralleled those of Indian Agents and drew on the same discourses of progress, civilization and citizenship, neither in practice nor in expected outcomes were they equivalent. Race-based exclusionary practices trumped the inclusionary pretensions of the civilizing mission.

Whatever “deficiencies” Taylor considered the Icelanders to have on first arrival, he ultimately believed that these difficulties could eventually be overcome, and that the Icelanders would fully assimilate with Anglo-Canadians and lay claim to the full privileges of whiteness. Taylor was convinced that for the Icelanders, assimilation and achievement of material progress went hand in hand. In confidential letters to John Lowe, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Taylor frequently proposed altering the exclusive character of the Icelandic reserve to allow Canadian farmers to settle among the new immigrants in order “...to show the people what can be done here.”⁹² Contact

⁹¹ On the role of Indian Agents in the Canadian Northwest, see Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). Robin Jarvis Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918-1939* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹² LAC, RG 17, “Secret and Confidential Correspondence” series [hereafter A-I-4], volume 1629, Taylor to Lowe, 14 April 1879.

with Anglo-Canadians outside the reserve was just as important. Taylor acted as an employment agent; he arranged for children, women, and men to be hired out to farmers and city residents as manual labourers. This sort of contact was, he felt, essential to the process of becoming Canadian. He was encouraged by the eagerness of the Icelanders to learn English, and by changes in their dress and behaviour that brought them more closely into line with Anglo-Canadian norms. “I would state that as characteristic of the Icelandic immigrant to this country, a gradual change is taking place with reference to those especially who live with Canadian families, so that I am often misled by their appearance, their dress, and their speech, so much and so closely resembling our own.”⁹³ Over time the Taylor family itself became intertwined with the Icelanders. In addition to John and Elizabeth’s adoption of Rannveig Sigríður Kristmundsdóttir, two of their nieces married leading Icelanders; Carrie Taylor married Sigurður Christopherson, a member of the Icelandic Deputation that chose the colony site. Susie Taylor married Halldór Briem, editor of the colony’s newspaper *Framfari*. In 1882, Susie and Halldór moved to Iceland where they lived for the rest of their lives. After the death of his second wife, John’s brother William Taylor married Sigríður Jónsdóttir, mother of the renowned children’s author Jón Sveinsson (Nonni) and the Icelandic-Canadian artist Friðrik Sveinsson (Fred Swanson).⁹⁴

Whereas Taylor sought to bring the Icelanders into as close contact as possible with Anglo-Canadians, he worked to create a rigid separation between the Icelanders and the region’s Aboriginal people. In reporting the choice of reserve site to Lt. Governor

⁹³ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 232, docket 23807, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 31 December 1878.

⁹⁴ Thorleifur Jackson, *Framhald á Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1923), 102.

Morris, Taylor reported that some Norway House Indians were planning to settle in the same place, and asked that something be done to prevent it. “This is the very spot which we have selected as the nucleus of our settlement, and therefore it would be of the very greatest advantage both to these Indians and to ourselves, if some very distinct and clearly defined line of division could be adopted and enforced.”⁹⁵ However, there was already an Aboriginal settlement in the Icelandic reserve, which Taylor seems to have tried to disperse. Elizabeth Fidler claimed that Taylor had ordered her out of her house on the White Mud/Icelander’s river.⁹⁶ For his part Taylor argued that he had continually received assurances from Lt. Governor Morris and Indian Department officials that the natives had no claim to land in the Icelandic reserve, and that they were to remove to their own reserves further north.⁹⁷ The vision of the world divided into compartments that the reserve system represented held great appeal for Taylor. Many Icelanders also shared this vision, but felt that Taylor and the government had not gone far enough; in their 1879 petition to the Canadian government, Taylor’s former friend Ólafur Ólafsson, in his capacity as Colony Council Chairman, and the Lutheran pastor Páll Thorlaksson

⁹⁵ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1066, Taylor to Morris, 3 August 1875.

⁹⁶ LAC, Department of the Interior fonds, RG 15 [hereafter RG 15], Dominion Lands Branch series [hereafter D II 1], reel T-13113, volume 409, file 105883, “Elizabeth Fidler, Claim for loss of houses and improvements occasioned by occupation of Icelandic settlers.”

⁹⁷ Taylor to James F. Graham, 15 March 1880 in LAC, Department of Indian and North Affairs fonds, RG 10 [hereafter RG 10], Black series, reel C-10113, volume 3649, file 8200, “Clandeboye Agency - Claim to Land along the White Mud River by John Ramsay of St. Peter's band.”

complained that the reserve was “situated far from the settlements of all civilised people” and surrounded by Indian and Half-breed reserves.⁹⁸

This specific criticism from Ólafsson and Thorlaksson was part of a broader indictment of the colonization project generally and Taylor’s administration of it in particular, one of many instances in which Taylor’s judgment and leadership were called into question during his tenure as Icelandic Agent. Was it wise to move young families onto the reserve at the beginning of winter? Had the colony site been poorly chosen? Did the Icelanders have the capacity to become self-supporting settlers in the Northwest? Had the government loan been distributed equitably? During the smallpox crisis of 1876-77 Lt. Governor Morris had called Taylor irresponsible, and chastised the Dominion government for advancing the considerable sum of \$25,000 to his care.⁹⁹ The government became deeply concerned that all the money that had been spent on the project would be for naught; John Lowe, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, implored Taylor to do everything in his power to ensure that the Icelanders became self-supporting. He threatened that if Taylor did not succeed, relations with the government would be cut off “throwing to the ground your Castle in Spain.”¹⁰⁰

Taylor's listing and drafty house in the muddy village of Gimli was hardly a castle, and the climate of the Interlake region in which it was situated bore little resemblance to the Iberian Peninsula. Nonetheless, Lowe's comment accurately reflected Taylor's ambiguous position as an intermediary between the government and the

⁹⁸ LAC, RG 17, A-I-1, volume 247, docket 25445, Petition to the Dominion Government of Canada, March 1879.

⁹⁹ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B2, Ketcheson Collection, Letterbook 'M', no. 264, Morris to Scott, 28 June 1877.

¹⁰⁰ LAC, RG 17, “Semi-Official Letterbooks” series [hereafter A I 6], reel T-132, volume 1633, p. 217, Lowe to Taylor, 2 May 1877.

immigrant Icelanders. The Icelandic reserve was in large measure his private fiefdom; he was afforded considerable latitude in his decision-making and was provided with unusually generous resources to carry out his various grandiose plans. But, as Lowe reminded him, Taylor was also a mere functionary whose position was wholly dependent on maintaining the good graces of his superiors in Ottawa. To the Icelanders, however, Taylor was the everyday face of government power. He was the conduit through which vital aid to the colony flowed, and exercised paternal authority over them. This was something that not all of the Icelanders appreciated. Even for those who were on good terms with Taylor, there was a general frustration at their seemingly endless series of reverses. Many were looking for a way out, and Ólafsson and Thorlaksson became their champions. Whereas Taylor's solution to New Iceland's problems was to push the government to encourage Anglo-Canadians to settle vacant lands in and around the reserve, thereby helping to abate the colony's isolation and encouraging agricultural progress, his critics called for the break-up of the colony and forgiveness of the Icelanders' debts to the government.¹⁰¹

The fact that this petition was circulated in secret and sent directly to Ottawa without his knowledge infuriated Taylor. He assured the government that it was the work of a group of lazy malcontents who had done nothing to build the colony but everything to destroy it.¹⁰² There was no way that he could support its stated goals, as the dissolution of the colony would disgrace him and prove that his critics had been correct. Less than a year into the colonization experiment, its struggles led the government to put

¹⁰¹ LAC, RG 17, "Semi-Official Letterbooks" series [hereafter A I 6], reel T-132, volume 1633, p. 217, Lowe to Taylor, 2 May 1877.

¹⁰² LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Taylor to Lowe, 14 April 1879.

forward a confidential offer to relocate the colony to another part of the Northwest.¹⁰³ Taylor, however, declined the offer.¹⁰⁴ With so much on the line Taylor lashed out at his enemies in a bitter public announcement in the pages of the colony's newspaper, *Framfari*. He chastised those who dared to leave the colony without repaying their debts to the government; "such treacherous conduct is both wanting in gratitude and dishonourable, and likely to abase the reputation and honour of the entire Icelandic people, it becomes particularly degrading for the settlers of New Iceland."¹⁰⁵

As he struggled to salvage the colony as well as his own reputation, Taylor revealed that it was not simply his understanding of race that carried over from his earlier life in Barbados, but also his ideas about the relationship between work, debt, and mobility. Taylor had never entirely abandoned the idea of bonded labour. When he left Ontario for the Northwest in 1875, just as he had done forty years earlier when he left Barbados for Texas, he signed a servant to an indenture contract. The young English immigrant Everett Parsonage agreed to work for Taylor for a period of eight months.¹⁰⁶ As well, Taylor's attempt to control the situation in New Iceland bears a resemblance to the labour regime that followed emancipation in Barbados. The "Master and Servants Act" provided for relations between former slave-owners and the newly free labour force. Workers could live on the plantation, occupy houses and provision grounds there, but if the contract was broken then workers had to forfeit almost all of the fruits of their labour. The purpose was to ensure that the estates would continue to have a sufficient

¹⁰³ LAC, RG 17, "John Lowe's Secret and Confidential Letterbook" series [hereafter A-I-5], reel T-131, volume 1631 pp. 92-93, Lowe to Taylor, 5 June 1876.

¹⁰⁴ LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Taylor to Lowe, 13 July 1876.

¹⁰⁵ *Framfari*, 14 May 1879, pp. 565-566.

¹⁰⁶ New Iceland Heritage Museum. Indenture contract between John Taylor and Everett Parsonage, 18 September 1875.

supply of labour and the effect was to curtail freedom of movement.¹⁰⁷ Taylor appears to have believed that the Icelanders' acceptance of government support constituted a form of indenture contract that required their continued residence on the reserve and sustained labour towards the development of the colony. He therefore tried to use their indebtedness as a lever to ensure that they would not abandon New Iceland. To this end, Taylor asked the Dominion government to appoint him stipendiary magistrate so that he could seize individuals' property, principally livestock, in order to hold them accountable for their debts to the government. Anyone who wished to leave New Iceland would be forced to start over from scratch.¹⁰⁸ Even though he was eventually appointed magistrate, the Chief Justice of Manitoba, the Lieutenant Governor, and the federal Department of Justice all doubted the legality and utility of Taylor's plans. As a result, he was instructed to use the threat of his legal power as a deterrent against out-migration, but to refrain from taking any concrete legal action.¹⁰⁹ The effect was that many of the disaffected Icelanders realized that Taylor was a toothless tiger.

Taylor's opponents were keenly aware of the implications of linking indebtedness and work with freedom of movement. The former Icelandic parliamentarian Björn Pétursson astutely observed that this was an infringement on their personal liberty: "it never occurred to the government, I dare say, to establish the Icelanders (as beneficiaries of the loan) as a kind of serfs [sic] on the land here..."¹¹⁰ The idea that they were to be

¹⁰⁷ Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados: From Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 109.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor to the Acting Lt. Governor of Keewatin, 17 May 1879 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 253, docket 26095, J.S. Dennis to Lowe, 11 July 1879.

¹⁰⁹ LAC, John Lowe fonds, MG 29, E18, volume 19, Taylor to Lowe, 9 June 1879.

¹¹⁰ *Framfari*, 26 March 1879, pp. 526-528.

kept in a form of debt-slavery in the Icelandic reserve must have circulated widely, as Sigtryggur Jónasson was forced to clarify the issue in *Framfari*; “It was never intended to institute a form of slavery in this colony; it was intended only as a colony of free and honourable men.”¹¹¹ Nonetheless, Taylor does appear to have been attempting to create a system of debt peonage to ensure that the colonization project would not end in failure. The crisis demonstrated that Taylor was capable of flipping from the hopeful, optimistic, and encouraging Baptist missionary to his earlier incarnation as the product of West Indian slave society, a man who used restrictive and coercive measures towards those placed under his authority.

However, by 1880 the situation in New Iceland had changed. Consecutive years of flooding caused further hardships, and Taylor was forced to face the prospect of abandoning the reserve.

I am making arrangements for my family to remove for a season to Red River. It will be a heavy loss if I have to abandon the place entirely. I have taken great pleasure in improving my house and garden and have everything now so comfortable that it is very trying to give it up...I can well understand the feelings of a young fellow who got married and settled here 5 years ago and who after working like a slave to make a comfortable home, is now forced to leave and says that it made him cry like a child when he first realized that he had to abandon everything.¹¹²

With Taylor’s blessing, his brother William, his former servant Everett Parsonage, his niece’s husband Sigurður Christopherson and several other Icelanders from in and around Gimli took steps to found a new colony in southwestern Manitoba. In 1881 Taylor moved his family from Gimli permanently, first to St. Andrews on the Red River and then to Carberry in southwestern Manitoba, where he continued to work as Icelandic

¹¹¹ Ibid., 17 July 1879, pp. 620-628.

¹¹² LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Taylor to Lowe, 28 February 1881.

Agent assisting the new settlement, attempting to resolve the issue of government indebtedness, and making proposals to found new Icelandic colonies on the Bow River in Alberta and in British Columbia.¹¹³ He also continued, as his friend Friðjón Friðriksson put it, “to build castles in the air.”¹¹⁴ This included a reformulation of his industrial farm plan of 1875, which he now called an “Emigrants refuge”. The plan called for new immigrants to be temporarily settled in well-organized villages on reserved sections, in order to mitigate some of the hardships of the colonization experience: “In a thousand ways the sorrows, the sufferings and the anxieties of newly arrived settlers might be relieved. How great these troubles are at times, few can conceive. How many are crushed by them and die helplessly at their lonely farms, no one knows.”¹¹⁵ He even attempted to move beyond his association with the Icelanders. In 1882 he petitioned Governor General Lord Lorne to assist Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms in Russia by establishing a block settlement somewhere in the Northwest that could be “placed in hands of trustees to carry out the benevolent design of providing new homes far removed from the cruelties and atrocities so shamefully perpetrated on these people in the name of religion.”¹¹⁶

In the winter of 1883-84, Taylor traveled to Florida in an effort to restore his declining health. On the return journey to Manitoba, he died in Milwaukee on 18 August

¹¹³ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 381, docket 41056, Taylor to Lowe, 5 September 1883. LAC, RG 17, A I 6, reel T-139, volume 1642, p. 346, Lowe to Taylor, 29 May 1884.

¹¹⁴ University of Manitoba Icelandic Collection [hereafter UMIC], Friðjón Friðriksson to Rev. Jón Bjarnason, 19 December 1880. Typescripts in English translation are available at the Archives of Manitoba. See AM, New Iceland collection, MG 8, A 6-7.

¹¹⁵ LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Taylor to Lowe, 28 February 1881.

¹¹⁶ LAC, John A. Macdonald fonds, reel C-4814, MG 26, volume 82, pp. 31998-31999, Taylor to Lord Lorne, 15 February 1882.

1884 at the age of 71. Elizabeth Taylor returned to Manitoba for a time before settling in Trenton, Ontario with brother and foster-daughter Rose. She died at Rose's home in Toronto in 1920, her ninety-fourth year.¹¹⁷

* * *

In spite of the terrible difficulties faced by the settlers in the first years of the Icelandic reserve, many Icelanders had a profound respect for John and Elizabeth Taylor. Kristmundur Benjamínsson, father of Rose Taylor wrote, "I lack the means to pay my benefactors for what they have done for me and, what is more, they do not want any repayment; but I wish in this manner to declare my gratitude publicly and wish God's blessing on Mr. Taylor and his wife."¹¹⁸ Símon Símonsson, who was generally critical of Taylor's lack of fore thought, nonetheless considered him to be "a good and God-fearing man..."¹¹⁹ Friðjón Friðriksson, one of Taylor's closest allies wrote of him, "Poor soul! I do respect him highly in spite of his shortcomings. He is such a good, loyal, and well-intentioned person."¹²⁰ His friend and Assistant Agent Sigtryggur Jónasson later reflected that though Taylor had done a wonderful service for the Icelanders by leading them into the Northwest, the thanks he got for his contribution from many settlers was decidedly inferior to that received by Moses from the Israelites.¹²¹ However, in the work of later Icelandic-Canadian historians, the controversies over Taylor's term as Icelandic Agent faded to the background, and his contribution to the founding of their community was highlighted. In 1975, on the occasion of New Iceland's centenary, Wilhelm

¹¹⁷ Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," 102.

¹¹⁸ *Framfari*, 14 May 1879, p. 569.

¹¹⁹ UMASC, Símon Símonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04).

¹²⁰ UMIC, Friðjón Friðriksson to Rev. Jón Bjarnason, 19 December 1880.

¹²¹ Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," 102.

Kristjanson wrote, "John Taylor was God-fearing and devout. His family ties were close. He was kind-hearted and generous and there was love in his heart. He was a strong humanitarian whose active concern was for the distressed individual as well as humanity in general."¹²² Despite the disappointments and failures of his term as Icelandic Agent it is clear that John Taylor was, to some degree, able to leave his troubled past in Barbados and Texas behind and reinvent himself, as he had vowed to do in the Chapel of Ease on Seymour Street in 1844. Still, his new guise was not fashioned entirely out of whole cloth; it was instead a patchwork quilt of old elements recombined or turned inside out. Examined in its entirety, John Taylor's turbulent career provides unexpected linkages between the end of slave society in the West Indies and the onset of white settler domination in the Canadian Northwest.

¹²² Kristjanson, "John Taylor and the Pioneer Icelandic Settlement in Manitoba," 41.

Chapter 6
Becoming British Subjects:
Municipal Government, Citizenship, and the *Vatnsþing*

One of the most persistent myths about the Icelandic reserve is that during the first twelve years of its existence it was a semi-autonomous state called “the Republic of New Iceland.”¹ This myth is derived from the fact that, beginning in 1877, the colonists managed their local affairs according to a unique form of representative municipal government of their own making. Under this system, the inhabitants of the colony annually elected committees of five men in each of New Iceland’s four settlements to deal with matters such as the building and maintenance of roads, public sanitation, and poor relief. A district council, composed of the foremen of each of the settlement councils plus a chairman and vice-chairman elected by a majority of the twenty settlement councilors, was responsible for matters that affected the entire colony, for resolving disputes between settlements, and for liaising with higher levels of government.² The original settlers did not refer to this system as a republic, or claim that it had any special constitutional status within Canada.³ Sigtryggur Jónasson, the first district council foreman, referred to it as a municipal system.⁴

¹ David Arnason, “The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings,” in *The New Icelanders: A North American Community*, ed. David Arnason and Vincent Arnason (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), 6-7. See also *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, 1 December 2000.

² For the complete regulations, see Walter J. Lindal, “The Laws and Regulations of New Iceland,” *Icelandic Canadian* 50, no. 4 (1992): 210-22.

³ See, for example, Guðlaugur Magnússon, “Landnám Íslendinga í Nýja Íslandi,” *Almanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* 1899, 35-38.

⁴ Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877, included in Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17 [hereafter RG 17], “General Correspondence” series [hereafter A-I-1], volume 187, docket 19318, Taylor to Lowe, 31 March 1877.

New Iceland's government has figured prominently in Icelandic ethnic histories. Icelandic community historians Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, Wilhelm Kristjanson, Walter Lindal, and Nelson Gerrard as well as Icelandic historians Guðjón Arngrímsson and Jónas Thor, never called New Iceland a republic or use the proper name "Republic of New Iceland."⁵ Yet since the 1940s the myth of the republic has become a consistent feature the popular history and public memory of the Icelandic community in North America. Its origins can be traced to the writings of Steina Jónasina Sommerville, a women's suffrage activist, *Manitoba Free Press* journalist, and daughter of original New Iceland pioneers Jónas Stefánsson and Steinunn Grímsdóttir. During the 1940s Sommerville wrote a series of historical articles in which she claimed that during its early years New Iceland functioned "virtually as a republic" and was a "sovereign" or "independent" state.⁶ One of Sommerville's articles was published in the 1945 transactions of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society. A few years later, the society's Secretary, W.L. Morton, included a reference to the "Republic of New Iceland"

⁵ See Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, vol. 3 (Winnipeg: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1945), 71-78; Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965), 54-58; Walter J. Lindal, *Canada Ethnica II: The Icelanders in Canada* (Winnipeg: Viking Press, 1967), 138-50; Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985), 25; Guðjón Arngrímsson, *Nýja Ísland: Saga of the Journey to New Iceland*, trans. Robert Christie (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000), 185-91; Jónas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 107-09.

⁶ See S.J. Sommerville, "Icelanders in Canada," *Canadian Geographical Journal* 21, no. 4 (1940): 192-201; S.J. Sommerville, "The Twelve-year Republic," *Icelandic Canadian* 3, no. 4 (1945): 5-7; S.J. Sommerville, "Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada," *Papers Read Before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, 1944-45* (1945): 25-43.

in his *Manitoba: A History*.⁷ This was probably the first instance in which that proper name was used, and has become the authoritative source for later writers.⁸

Even though New Iceland was not a republic, and did not possess the sweeping autonomy that has sometimes been claimed in any formal sense, the Icelandic colonists' efforts to create and operate a system of local government in the Canadian Northwest during the 1870s was unique and deserves closer examination. By focusing on the separateness of New Iceland's system, Icelandic ethnic historians have missed a parallel story—the way in which local government contributed to the integration of the colony and its people into the institutional and political framework of Canada. This chapter addresses two main questions about local government in the Icelandic reserve: first, how did New Iceland's system compare with contemporary practices in Iceland and English Canada? Second, how were local government and citizenship related to the process of colonization in the Canadian Northwest?

It is important to recognize that this system was not imposed on the Icelanders from the outside. The initiative came from within the reserve and, in part, reflected grass-roots demands for better local organization in the District of Keewatin.⁹ The

⁷ W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 177.

⁸ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 261; Arnason, "The Icelanders in Manitoba: The Myth of Beginnings."; Anne Brydon, "Icelanders," in *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*, ed. Paul Robert Magocsi (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario and University of Toronto Press, 1999), 688.

⁹ In this respect, New Iceland's government was similar to the "Council of Manitoba" a local government created by the settlers of Portage la Prairie in the 1850s to address the shortcomings of Hudson's Bay Company rule (See *The Globe*, 19 February 1869). In 1867-68, the Canadian settler Thomas Spence attempted to get recognition for the council, but was informed by the Colonial Office that this was illegal. See Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 113-14.

Icelanders therefore improvised, creating an institution, shaped by both the colonists' experience from Iceland and information about Canadian practices provided by the government agents John Taylor and Sigtryggur Jónasson. Taylor and Jónasson, in fact, were instrumental in the process, and worked to shape it to meet the goals and expectations of the Dominion government. They oversaw the drafting of a set of regulations, which were approved at public meetings in the reserve and then forwarded to the Dominion government. Minister of the Interior David Mills was sympathetic with their purpose, and used their regulations to draft the "Keewatin Townships and Municipalities Bill." In the spring of 1878 the bill was the subject of a lively parliamentary debate about the relationship between property, citizenship, and municipal institutions as well as the capacities of Icelanders for self-government. This bill, however, never became law. It was bogged down by partisan and sectional wrangling, and aroused concerns that the proposed system was too complex for "ignorant Icelanders" to operate.¹⁰ However, New Iceland's municipal system continued on without the legal sanction the settlers had sought. During its brief, tumultuous history it was a key forum in which the central issues of the colony's early years—the viability of the Lake Winnipeg site and the settlers' relationship with the government and the wider society—were debated and contested.

This chapter argues that New Iceland's municipal system played an important role in integrating the Icelandic reserve more tightly into the project of liberal colonial rule in the Canadian Northwest. Local government was critical to the Icelanders' emergence as political subjects aligned with the norms and assumptions of the contemporary liberal

¹⁰ Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (26 March 1878) at 1398.

state. While the system had some unique features and a distinct terminology, its significance does not reside primarily in its institutional features. The history of New Iceland's local government is worth paying attention to because it reveals the extension of liberal rule as a dynamic process of interaction and contestation between centre and margin. The colony leadership saw the municipal system as a means to weave the reserve into the political and administrative architecture of the Canadian state, and to educate the immigrant Icelanders about the rights and responsibilities of liberal citizenship, a goal that was shared by the government of Alexander Mackenzie. Even though the government's efforts at legalization failed, New Iceland's municipal system helped to extend the project of liberal rule by tying the reserve and its people into the same kind of governmental apparatuses that operated in other places and at other levels of state power.

Canadian historians have generally paid little attention to municipal government. According to Michèle Dagenais, most of the existing literature on the subject tends to be characterized by one of two approaches: either as part of a triumphal narrative about the march of democracy, or through a somewhat mechanical understanding of local government as an instrument of social control.¹¹ The brief mentions of New Iceland's government that have been made outside the narrow confines of Icelandic-Canadian ethnic history have tended to fall in the former category. Historian Lewis H. Thomas made brief mention of it as part of the story of the "struggle for responsible government" in the North-West Territories. Echoing Fredrick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis,

¹¹ Michèle Dagenais, "The Municipal Territory: A Product of the Liberal Order?," in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, ed. Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 202.

Thomas considered the Icelanders' initiative to be an example of the democratic tendencies of frontier communities.¹² While a push for democratic rights was unquestionably part of the development of municipal government in New Iceland, it is just as accurate to treat it as an instance of local state formation in the same sense as used by Alan Greer and Ian Radforth; it involved the creation of an institutional framework and the employment of a set of administrative practices that served to increase the level of state surveillance.¹³ In this sense it was part of the 'revolution of government' that had led to the expansion of representative institutions and bureaucratic administration in Canada since the 1840s.¹⁴ In a colonial context where distances were great and communication was often problematic, local government could serve an invaluable function as a semi-autonomous node of state power, dealing effectively with issues of purely local significance and providing the central authorities with intelligence about conditions in distant regions.¹⁵ In his post-rebellion report on the affairs of the Canadas, Lord Durham cited the lack of effective local government as one of the factors that had contributed to unrest in the colonies. Durham's successor as Governor General, Charles Poulett Thomson, later Lord Sydenham, also believed in the importance of local government in stabilizing the colonial state and instigated important reforms.¹⁶

Durham and Sydenham considered local government to be more than simply an administrative convenience; by training individuals in the rights and responsibilities of

¹² Lewis H. Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government in the North-West Territories, 1870-97*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 85.

¹³ See Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 10-11.

¹⁴ Bruce Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men?: Inspection, Education, and State Formation in Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 6.

¹⁵ Ian Radforth, "Sydenham and Utilitarian Reform," in *Colonial Leviathan*, 84.

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*

citizenship, it was a foundation on which the pillars of the liberal state could be constructed. Liberal theorists such as John Stuart Mill argued that the local council was an appropriate field for the “nourishment of public spirit and development of intelligence” by men from the lower classes with no previous experience in politics or administration.¹⁷ Radicals such as Mill were prepared to challenge the exclusion of women from political participation, but in general, local government served to reinforce and perpetuate contemporary inequalities of race and gender. As Bruce Curtis has nicely put it, "Having served a political apprenticeship under the careful gaze of a tutelar state, men of the lower classes might act as political guardians in their turn, guardians of the inequitable distribution of property, of women's subordination, and of the dominance of the 'white' races."¹⁸

The analysis in this chapter builds from recent work on municipal government that has explored the role of spatial practices in extending state surveillance and liberal governance. Drawing inspiration from Foucault, Michèle Dagenais has argued that municipal government was a “territorialization of state power at the local level” that integrated regions where state power had previously been limited.¹⁹ A similar argument has been made by Rod Bantjes, who explores the connection between the cadastral survey and local government in rural Saskatchewan.²⁰ Bantjes argues that while spatial organization was intended to shape community and serve the interests of panoptic governmentality, it could also be a base for class formation and political mobilization

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861), 268.

¹⁸ Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men?*, 10.

¹⁹ Dagenais, "The Municipal Territory," 207-08.

²⁰ Rod Bantjes, *Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 65-69.

against the predominant political and economic order.²¹ In New Iceland, the municipal system deepened the spatial practices of colonization and surveillance that developed during the crisis of the smallpox epidemic. The boundaries established by the Dominion Lands Survey and enforced by the public health measures taken during the quarantine became units of local administration.

Protest and resistance was also part of local government in the Icelandic reserve during the 1870s. The settlers used the municipal system to voice their frustrations with the Dominion government and to demand changes to improve the situation on the reserve. However local resistance was not a rejection of the liberal principles of private property, market production and individual rights in favour of some communitarian alternative. In spite of their many discontents, the Icelanders were fundamentally agents of the new order, and their experiment in local self-government confirmed their acceptance of representative local government on the Ontario model, shaped as it was by liberal political economy and the accompanying hierarchies of class, race and gender. The Icelanders' protest was framed as a demand for the full set of rights accorded to white, male, British subjects. If government immigrant reserves were, as Bantjes suggests, reformatories where the character of immigrants could be transformed according to the demands of liberal modernity,²² it seems that, at least in the case of the Icelandic reserve, it was the inmates that were actively pushing for their own reformation. Still, it is necessary to resist the temptation to simplify this case into a story about grassroots democratic mobilization versus unresponsive and autocratic centralized rule. The

²¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

competing factions and ideological disagreements on parade in Ottawa had their counterparts among the Icelanders.

In the context of the smallpox quarantine, John Taylor and Sigtryggur Jónasson were desperate to prove that the colony was not a failure, but rather was turning the corner toward progress, even under the most difficult of circumstances. The formation of a municipal government was one way to accomplish this goal. In this task, the agents received very little direction from Ottawa.²³ Officials in the Departments of Agriculture and Interior were sometimes sympathetic with their efforts, but generally did not share their enthusiasm for institution building. This was largely because the government's main concern was, first ensuring that the colony could feed itself without government assistance. However, as John Lowe explained to Taylor, it was also a jurisdictional matter: "...most of all that you ask for pertains to the Local and not to the Federal Government."²⁴ The Icelanders' problem was that they were in a local jurisdiction, Keewatin, where there were no rules stipulating how elective municipal institutions could be created. In this sense, Lowe was wrong; provision for municipal government in the Icelandic reserve *was* a matter of federal responsibility.

This situation developed because the Icelandic reserve was part of the North-West Territories when it was established in October 1875. At that time, the government of the territories consisted of a Lieutenant Governor and appointed council that had virtually no independent legislative powers. Governor and Council served, often unhappily, in an

²³ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 180, docket 18671, Taylor to Lowe, 8 February 1877.

²⁴ LAC, RG 17, "Semi-Official Letterbooks" series [hereafter A I 6], reel T-132, volume 1633, p. 217, Lowe to Taylor, 2 May 1877.

advisory role to centralized rule from Ottawa.²⁵ Justices of the Peace appointed by the Lieutenant Governor, and the North-West Mounted Police, comprised the territory's rudimentary justice system.²⁶ It appears that John Taylor was aware of this situation and attempted to bring the Icelandic reserve into line with practices elsewhere in the Northwest. Before leaving Winnipeg with the first party of settlers, Taylor asked Lt. Governor Alexander Morris that he and Ólafur Ólafsson be named Justices of the Peace, and that Páll Jóhannesson be named the colony's constable.²⁷ As the previous chapter detailed, Taylor believed that institution building was essential to the growth and stability of the colony. He thought it was imperative to involve the Icelanders in the administration of the colony. In January 1876 he established an elected council "for the management of [the Icelanders'] affairs, and for regulating generally all matters among them."²⁸ This five-man council, called the *bæjarnefnd* (village committee) dealt with issues such as the distribution of government supplies, and the recording of the settlers' homestead claims. Taylor was a member of this committee, as was his right hand man and translator Friðjón Friðriksson and his fellow Justice of the Peace Ólafur Ólafsson,

²⁵ See *An Act for the Temporary Government of Rupert's Land and the North-Western Territory when united with Canada, Statutes of Canada, 1869, 32-33 Vic. c.3* and amendment in *Statutes of Canada, 1873, 36 Vic. c.5*; *An Act to make further provision for the Government of the North-West Territories, Statutes of Canada, 1871, 34 Vic. c.16* and amendment in *Statutes of Canada, 1873, 36 Vic. c.5*; Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government*, 71.

²⁶ See Thomas Michael Reynolds, "Justices of the Peace in the Northwest Territories, 1870-1905" (MA thesis, University of Regina, 1978).

²⁷ Archives of Manitoba [hereafter AM], Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1133, Taylor to Morris, 14 October 1875.

²⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 179 docket 18518, Taylor to the Minister of Agriculture, 1 January 1877.

who served as Chairman.²⁹ As conditions in the colony worsened during the winter of 1875-76, the committee became the target of the settlers' frustration.³⁰ In the spring the committee dissolved, as the colonists dispersed from the area around Gimli to claim land in other parts of the reserve, or to find waged work in Manitoba.³¹ Local government was not discussed again until the fall of 1876, and was further delayed by the emergency created by the smallpox epidemic.³²

By this time, Alexander Mackenzie's government had brought a new North-West Territories Act into effect that provided for elective institutions at both the territorial and municipal level. The franchise was restricted to, "...*bona fide* male residents and householders of adult age, not being aliens, or unenfranchised Indians."³³ Under these rules only five people out of the approximately 1,200 residents of the Icelandic reserve would have been eligible to vote.³⁴ However, even these five could not vote in the District of Keewatin, because there was nothing to vote for. The Keewatin Act recapitulated most of the provisions of the Northwest Territories Act of 1875, but the

²⁹ The other members of the committee were Jakob Jónsson and Jóhannes Magnússon. See AM, New Iceland collection, MG 8, A 6-7, Letter #7 Ólafur Ólafson frá Espihóli to sera Jón Bjarnason, 13 January 1876. For this letter in the original Icelandic, see Landsbókasafn Íslands, Lbs. 4390, 4to.

³⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 151, docket 15109, Taylor to Lowe, 9 February 1876.

³¹ *Framfari*, 10 December 1877, p. 47. Page numbers are for the published English translation. See George Houser, ed. *Framfari: 1877 to 1880* (Gimli, MB: Gimli Chapter Icelandic National League of North America, 1986).

³² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 173 docket 17911, Taylor to Lowe, 28 November 1876 and volume 180 docket 18671, Taylor to Lowe, 8 February 1877.

³³ *An Act to amend and consolidate the laws respecting the North-West Territories, Statutes of Canada*, 1875, 38 Vic. c.49 s.13.

³⁴ These were John Taylor, his brother William Taylor, his indentured servant Everett Parsonage, Edward Smith, a Canadian who had settled near Willow Point just prior to the creation of the reserve, and James Thomas Halcrow, an employee of the Robert Fuller's sawmill on Big Island who homesteaded on the island after the mill closed.

sections related to elective and representative institutions were intentionally excluded.³⁵ The Mackenzie government's reasoning was that the legislation was a temporary measure that anticipated the incorporation of the new territory into the Province of Manitoba or its re-annexation to the North-West Territories after the boundary between Manitoba and Ontario was settled. Once that occurred, the laws respecting municipal and educational organization in those jurisdictions would be applied to Keewatin, but until then, the "few people" in the new territory would be subject to a "primitive system of government" that concentrated authority in the hands of the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba.³⁶ What was left implicit was that the vast majority of the people who lived in Keewatin were in any case excluded from political rights by virtue of the fact that they were either unnaturalized aliens or unenfranchised Indians.

This did not prevent John Taylor and Sigtryggur Jónasson from again trying to push ahead with a colony government. The agents thought this measure would help quell unrest in the colony and educate the colonists about their social and political responsibilities in Canada. As Jónasson explained to John Lowe, "Some sort of organization was necessary to encourage the people to work together and each individual to take interest in the welfare and progress of the whole colony..." and to "...train them for citizens [sic] under the Government of this country."³⁷ In January 1877 public meetings were held at Gimli and Icelanders' River to draft a set of regulations for the colony government. The various proposals that emerged were combined and adopted by

³⁵ *An Act respecting the North-West Territories, and to create a separate Territory out of part thereof, Statutes of Canada, 1876, 39 Vic. c.21.*

³⁶ Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (17 February 1876) at 86 and 195.

³⁷ Jónasson to Lowe, 9 February 1877 included in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 178, docket 18408, Taylor to Lowe, 28 December 1876.

majority vote at a meeting held at Gimli on 5 February 1877.³⁸ These regulations were later published in the colony's newspaper, *Framfari* (Progressive) as *Samþykktir til bráðabirgðar stjórnarfyrirkomulags í Nýja Íslandi* (Decisions reached on a temporary form of government for New Iceland).³⁹ The same issue of the paper included an "exhortation" from Jónasson to the settlers urging them to aspire to and push for full citizenship rights: "We must not think of ourselves as strangers here, but as an integral part of the society in which we are now living... We must make certain that we enjoy equal rights with other subjects of this country...."⁴⁰ After further public discussion the temporary rule were revised and published as the *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* (the Governmental Regulations of New Iceland), which came into effect 14 January 1878.⁴¹

The *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* is one of the central documents in the colony's history. It is often called New Iceland's constitution and has been central to the claim that New Iceland was a republic.⁴² However, neither the words *stjónarskrá* (constitution) nor *lýðveldi* (republic) appear in the document. Based on Sigtryggur Jónasson's correspondence with the Dominion government, it is clear that *Stjórnarlög* meant 'constitution' in the sense of "by-laws or regulations" (lög) under which the colony would be governed/administered (stjórna).⁴³ Although New Iceland was never an independent state and its local government was not a republic in either name or function, it was technically a contravention of Canadian law. By creating municipalities and

³⁸ *Framfari*, 10 December 1877, p. 47.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 December 1877, p. 57-58.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1877, p. 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14 January 1878, pp. 77-81.

⁴² Sommerville, "Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada," 29-31.

⁴³ This is consistent with the translations of *Stjórnarlög* provided by Professor Skuli Johnson, "Governmental Regulations," (See *Ibid.*: 38-43.) and Walter Lindal, "Laws and Regulations" (Lindal, "The Laws and Regulations of New Iceland," 220.)

making rules about their functioning, the Icelandic colonists had assumed powers that belonged to the provinces under section ninety-two of the British North America Act.⁴⁴

The first Manitoba municipal act in 1873 authorized cabinet to create municipalities when there were more than thirty male householders in an area and when two thirds of them petitioned for the municipality's creation.⁴⁵ The Northwest Territories Act of 1875 placed this authority in the hands of the Lt. Governor in Council, after they had ascertained that a given district had reached a population of 1,000 inhabitants.⁴⁶ The *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* presumed the same authority. Article I constituted the Icelandic reserve as a political and administrative unit called *Vatnsþing* (Lake District), and further divided it into four municipalities.⁴⁷ Other matters that were included in the *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* that were ordinarily in the realm of provincial statute included the frequency and timing of elections and the procedures governing them (Article II), eligibility for the franchise and holding public office (Article III), taxation and statute labour (Article IV), and the composition and function of municipal councils (Articles V and VI).⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *British North America Act*, 1867, s.92.

⁴⁵ Murray S. Donnelly, *The Government of Manitoba* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 135. See also Gordon Goldsborough, *With One Voice: A History of Municipal Governance in Manitoba* (Portage La Prairie, MB: Association of Manitoba Municipalities, 2008).

⁴⁶ *An Act to amend and consolidate the laws respecting the North-West Territories, Statutes of Canada*, 1875, 38 Vic. c.49 s.13.

⁴⁷ "Lakething" was the translation that Sigtryggur Jónasson provided for *Vatnsþing* (see Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877, included in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318). Walter Lindal translated *Vatnsþing* as "Lake District" which also accurately captures Jónasson's meaning. Lindal's assertion that "thing" in this context did not mean parliament or assembly, but rather a territorial division is born out by Jónasson description of the colony government as "The Council for Lakething." See Lindal, "The Laws and Regulations of New Iceland," 220.

⁴⁸ See *Ibid.*

In the case of the franchise, New Iceland's rules represented a substantive liberalization of practices in Iceland as well as the rest of Canada. In Iceland, the electorate consisted of males over the age of twenty-five who were farmers or householders and who paid taxes; this represented only about nine percent of the population.⁴⁹ In Canada, until the Franchise Bill of 1885, each province had the right to determine who had the right to vote in municipal, provincial, *and* federal elections. The basic requirements were to be male, twenty-one years of age and a British subject. All provinces, except British Columbia, also had property and income qualifications. Three provinces had qualifications that amounted to restrictions based on race. Ontario and Manitoba excluded Aboriginal people who received annuities from the crown, and British Columbia excluded all Indians as well as Chinese immigrants whether they were naturalized subjects or not.⁵⁰ New Iceland's rules opened the franchise up substantively in three ways: first, by allowing immigrant aliens who had not become naturalized British subjects to vote; second, by lowering the minimum voting age to eighteen, and finally by essentially eliminating property qualifications. Voting was open to the permanent resident who "possesses real estate, or who is a householder, or has permanent employment in the district, and who has an unblemished reputation."⁵¹ New Iceland's rules may also have partially overcome gender-based exclusion, by extending the franchise to unmarried or widowed women. The regulations described a qualified elector

⁴⁹ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 261-65.

⁵⁰ See the tables (2.1 and 2.2) on voting rights by province between 1867 and 1885 in Elections Canada., *A History of the Vote in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: Published by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, 2007), 46-47.

⁵¹ Text from the Skuli Johnson translation (Sommerville, "Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada," 38. Clergymen and resident schoolteachers were denied the right to vote.

as a *maður*, which has typically been translated as “man.” This term however is not gender-specific. It is a generic term more correctly translated as “person” or “individual.”⁵² Elsewhere in New Iceland’s regulations, the gender-specific term *karlmaður* (man) is used to refer to those obliged to perform statute labour on the colony’s roads.⁵³ Not enough is known about the elections in the colony to determine whether women voted, although it is clear that no woman ever served on any committee or council in New Iceland.⁵⁴ Still, a comparison with the situation in Iceland at the time suggests that the participation of women at the local level as voters was not out of the question. The 1872 law that instituted elective local government in Iceland also used the term *maður* to describe qualified electors. Icelandic jurists soon recognized that this did not to technically disqualify women, so parliament decided to resolve the issue. In 1881, the Icelandic legislators confirmed that unmarried women and widows who headed independent households and otherwise met the property and tax payment qualifications

⁵² On this same issue in the Icelandic context, see Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, "To Become a Man: The Ambiguities of Gender Relations in Late 19th and Early 20th century Iceland," in *Political Systems and Definitions of Gender Roles*, ed. Ann-Katherine Isaacs (Pisa: Edizioni Plus, 2001), 44.

⁵³ Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands IV kafli, 5 gr. See *Framfari*, 14 January 1878.

⁵⁴ I had hoped to solve this problem by examining the records from *Árnesbyggð* (River Point settlement), the only New Iceland municipality for which a relatively complete set of records exists. These are still in private hands, but Nelson Gerrard kindly permitted me access to his copies of these important records. While the local census records indicate that there were two women-headed households in the settlement, it is not possible to determine whether either of these women voted because the turnout at settlement committee elections was relatively small in relation to the numbers of people who were eligible to cast a ballot.

could vote in local elections.⁵⁵ In the same year, the Ontario legislature extended municipal voting rights to unmarried women on similar terms.⁵⁶

The Icelandic system of local government unquestionably influenced the colonists. From the mid-nineteenth century, a series of reforms slowly shifted political power from appointed to elected officials. As the issues over the franchise indicate, this was less a radical democratization than a limited accommodation of the aspirations of the farming class.⁵⁷ The eligible voters in each Icelandic commune selected a *hreppstjóri* (communal overseer). The *hreppstjóri* functioned as the deputy of the *sýslumaður* (sheriff) who wielded judicial and administrative power over the larger territorial unit called a *sýsla* (district). The *amt* (region) was composed of several districts and was headed by the *amtmaður* (regional governor), who was a royal appointee. In 1872, just as the emigration movement was beginning, a democratic element was added to this system when elected committees were added at each of the three levels of local administration. The farmers of each commune elected a committee of three to seven men called the *hreppsnefnd* (communal committee). A representative of this committee sat on the *sýslunefnd* (district committee). These district committees elected representatives from amongst themselves to sit on the *amtsráð* (regional council).⁵⁸ Many of the settlers who played a prominent part in the local government of the New Iceland colony either had first-hand experience with the Icelandic system of local government, or were from

⁵⁵ Hálfðánarson, "To Become a Man," 46-47.

⁵⁶ Catherine Lyle Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* ([Toronto]: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 22.

⁵⁷ See Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, "Social Distinctions and National Unity: On Politics of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Iceland," *History of European Ideas* 21, no. 6 (1995): 763-79.

⁵⁸ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 261-65.

families who did. Ólafur Ólafsson from Espihóll, who held several important positions in the colony, had been the communal overseer of the Grýtubakkahreppur in northern Iceland.⁵⁹ In New Iceland, the settlers abandoned the terminology of their homeland in favour of older territorial designations that had been used during the settlement of Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries. For example, the basic unit in New Iceland was *byggð* (settlement) rather than *hreppur*, and the *þing* (district) replaced *sýsla*.

Even if the colonists had replicated Iceland's system of local government in its entirety, its basic structure and division of responsibilities would have been recognizable to Canadians. There were strong parallels between commune-district-region of Iceland and the township-county-province system in Canada West/Ontario. Sigtryggur Jónasson explicitly stated that the Ontario municipal system was the model for New Iceland; he told John Lowe that he and Taylor had "tried as far as possible to organize everything in conformity with what is customary under the municipal act."⁶⁰ By this Jónasson meant that New Iceland's government had been modeled primarily on the Municipal Corporations Act of 1849 and subsequent amendments. This legislation, usually associated with the constitutional reformer Robert Baldwin, provided the basic structures of local government for Canada West/Ontario that continue in a similar form to this day.⁶¹ But exactly how was New Iceland's government modeled on the Ontario system? What were the similarities and what were the differences?

⁵⁹ Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga*, 210.

⁶⁰ Jónasson to Lowe, 9 February 1877 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 178, docket 18408, Taylor to Lowe, 28 December 1876.

⁶¹ For an account of its development, see J.H. Aitchison, "The Municipal Corporations Act of 1849," *Canadian Historical Review* 30, no. 2 (1949): 107-22. It's interesting to note that at the time New Iceland's municipal regulations were being

The most obvious parallel between the municipal systems of Ontario and New Iceland was in the way in which territorial divisions were structured. From the beginning of colonization in Upper Canada during the eighteenth century, the basic unit of local administration was the township, which consisted, on average, of 50,000 acres. As new areas were opened up for colonization, the provincial government surveyed new townships. This practice was continued in the Northwest in the form of the standardized Dominion Lands Survey system. The *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* subdivided the colony into four *byggðir* (settlements) that coincided with the territorial divisions created by the survey and were approximately the same size as Ontario townships (See figure 6.1). *Viðinesbyggð* (Willow Point settlement) comprised Townships 18 and 19, *Árnesbyggð* (River Point settlement), comprised townships 20 and 21, *Fljótsbyggð* (River settlement) townships 22 and 23 and *Mikleyjarbyggð* (Big Island settlement) consisted of the entire island.⁶² The reserve as a whole, *Vatnsþing* (Lake District), was analogous to a county in Ontario—essentially a collection of townships and villages in a given region.⁶³ In this respect, New Iceland was ahead of Manitoba, which adopted a municipal system based on the Ontario county model in 1883.⁶⁴

The organizational structure of the Ontario and New Iceland systems was also virtually the same. In Ontario, every year on the first Monday in January, the electors of

crafted, Baldwin's nephew Dr. William Augustus Baldwin was in the Icelandic reserve serving as a medical officer for the Keewatin Board of Health (see Chapter 4).

⁶² Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877 in LAC, RG 17, A-I-1, volume 187, docket 19318; also see *Framfari*, 14 January 1878, p. 77 and Lindal, "The Laws and Regulations of New Iceland," 211.

⁶³ J.M. McEvoy, *The Ontario Township*, ed. W.J. Ashley (Toronto: Warwick & Sons, 1889), 11.

⁶⁴ Donnelly, *The Government of Manitoba*, 135-36.

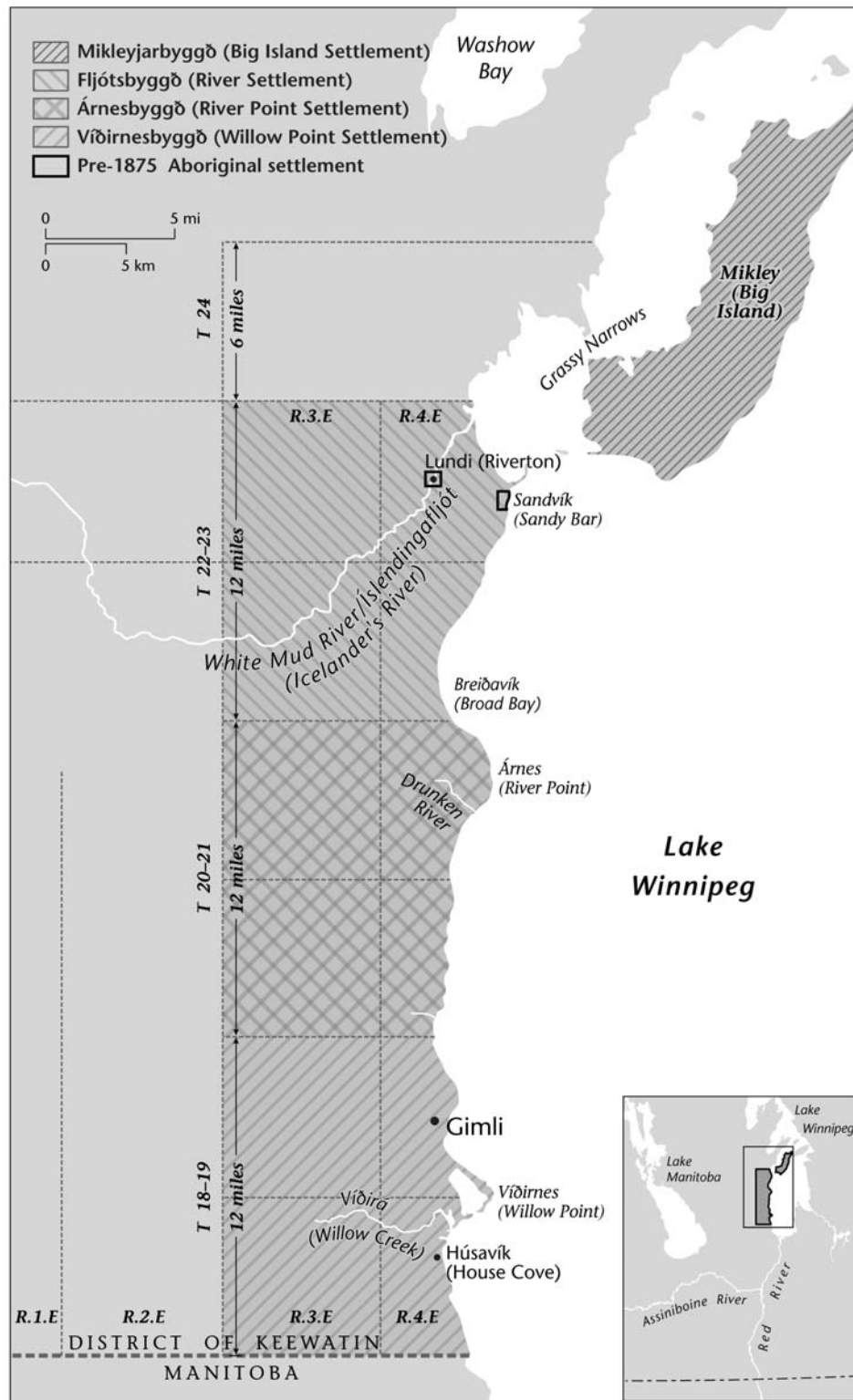


Figure 6.1. New Iceland showing the four *byggðir* (settlements). Map by Eric Leinberger, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia.

each township chose a council of five men. The township council chose from among their number a reeve and one or more deputy reeves, depending on the population in the township. The county council was made up of the reeves and deputy reeves from the various townships that comprise the county. The members of the county council elected a Warden to serve as their council chairman.⁶⁵ In New Iceland, the inhabitants of each settlement held a public meeting on the seventh of January to elect a *byggðarnefnd* (settlement committee) consisting of five councilors.⁶⁶ These councilors elected from among their ranks a *byggðarstjóri* (settlement foreman) and *varabyggðarstjóri* (deputy settlement foreman) as well as a secretary and a treasurer. The foremen of the five settlements comprised the *þingráð* (district council), which was headed by a *þingráðsstjóri* (district council foreman). In contrast to the Ontario system, the district council foreman and his deputy, the *varaþingráðsstjóri* were elected by a majority of the twenty settlement councilors, rather than the county council.⁶⁷ When John Taylor corresponded with the Dominion government about the district council, he simply used the Ontario cognates in place of the distinctive Icelandic terms. For example, in 1879 he

⁶⁵ McEvoy, *The Ontario Township*, 26-28, 40.

⁶⁶ The translations of terms from the *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* used here are generally from Sigtryggur Jónasson's March 1877 description of the system (See LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 187 docket 19318). This document was not available to previous translators, and there are some differences, notably that Jónasson uses the term foreman rather than "reeve" to describe the head of the settlement committees. Jónasson translates *Vatnsþing* as "Lakething" which is less precise than Lindal's translation of it as "Lake District". Since, as Lindal notes, *þing* can either mean an assembly or a territorial division, it seems best to use Lindal's translation in the interests of clarity. Jónasson unquestionably used *þing* in the sense of a political sub-division, since he referred to the colony government as "The Council for Lakething." See Lindal, "The Laws and Regulations of New Iceland," 220.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 214-17. Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318, Taylor to Lowe, 31 March 1877; *Framfari*, 14 January 1878, pp. 77-80.

referred to *þingráðsstjóri* Ólafur Ólafsson as “...holding the office of Warden for this County.”⁶⁸

The duties and responsibilities of a New Iceland settlement committee were in large measure the same as those of a township council in Ontario, but the district council exercised virtually none of the county council’s functions. Like their Ontario counterparts, settlement committees were responsible for road making and repair, public health and sanitation, care of the poor, assessment of property and the collection of taxes, and had the power to pass by-laws that came under their area of responsibility.⁶⁹ In Ontario, county councils built and maintained a courthouse and jail, provided for policing, high schools, and the payment of officials such as school inspectors.⁷⁰ The *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* said nothing about either school organization or the administration of justice—two crucial components of local government. The former appears to have been left out because the colonists felt they would need assistance to establish a school system. This was something that John Taylor had asked for repeatedly since the colony’s founding but which never materialized. Education was the constitutional responsibility of the provinces, so the Icelandic reserve’s ambiguous jurisdictional position again worked to its disadvantage. Early in 1876 a petition was circulated asking for school funding from the government. It was rejected by Minister of the Interior David Laird, on the grounds that his department was, “...not charged with the

⁶⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 250, docket 25759, Taylor to Lowe, 20 May 1879.

⁶⁹ See *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands*, VI kafli in *Framfari*, 14 January 1878, pp. 77-80; Lindal, "The Laws and Regulations of New Iceland," 213-14.

⁷⁰ McEvoy, *The Ontario Township*, 39.

education of any but Indian children.”⁷¹ The Icelanders nevertheless persisted in asking the Dominion government to take responsibility for the matter. The first ever meeting of the district council produced a resolution applying to the Dominion Government for a grant to establish common schools.⁷²

Unlike the matters of municipal government and school organization, the Keewatin Act was fairly clear on the administration of justice. All stipendiary magistrates in the North-West Territories continued to have jurisdiction in Keewatin, and matters that went beyond a magistrate’s authority were to be referred to the Manitoba courts. As well, the Lieutenant Governor could call on the Northwest Mounted Police to enforce the law in the district.⁷³ This probably explains why this topic was excluded from the *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands*. The settlers understood that their colony was subject to Canadian civil and criminal law, although they weren’t always certain what the laws were. At the first district council meeting, River settlement foreman Jóhann Briem moved that the statute labour system of Ontario be implemented in the colony in order to open up east-west roads along township lines. The only problem was that the council did not have copies of the relevant statutes, so they asked the council foreman to pass their request on to Ottawa.⁷⁴

⁷¹ AM, Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor’s Collection, Correspondence, no. 1191, Taylor to Morris, 10 January 1876 & no. 1230, Laird to Morris, 8 March 1876.

⁷² Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318, Taylor to Lowe, 31 March 1877.

⁷³ *An Act respecting the North-West Territories, and to create a separate Territory out of part thereof, Statutes of Canada, 1876, 39 Vic. c.21 s. 7 & 12.*

⁷⁴ Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318, Taylor to Lowe, 31 March 1877.

To navigate these uncertain legal waters, New Iceland's regulations included a unique conflict resolution mechanism aimed at preventing conflicts and civil litigation. At the committee elections, two conciliators and one deputy conciliator were chosen for each settlement. The task of these officials was to bring about agreement in private disputes. If they failed, then a committee of arbitration consisting of two men appointed by each party in the dispute, plus one agreed on by both, or, in the absence of that agreement, the foreman or deputy foreman of the district council, decided the issue by majority vote.⁷⁵ This process was also intended to resolve disputes between the settlements if efforts at mediation by the district council failed.⁷⁶

The main function of the district council was regulating relations between the colony and the outside world. On the administrative level, this entailed maintaining the colonization road that connected New Iceland to Manitoba. On the legislative side, the *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* gave the council power to enact by-laws to enlarge the boundaries of the Lake District, admit non-Icelandic settlers into the reserve, and to make "arrangements" with individuals, "...launching productive and beneficial undertakings."⁷⁷ The district council foreman had the responsibility of liaising with the *yfirstjórn* (superior government) on all matters affecting the colony. This could mean either the Keewatin government, which consisted solely of the Lieutenant Governor, or the Dominion government. In practice, however, the District Council foreman did not communicate directly with either, but rather through John Taylor, as the Dominion official responsible for the colony. This appears to have happened very infrequently;

⁷⁵ *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands*, IX kafli in *Framfari*, 14 January 1878.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, III kafli, 4 gr., *Framfari*, 14 January 1878.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, XII kafli in *Framfari*, 14 January 1878, pp. 77-80; Lindal, "The Laws and Regulations of New Iceland," 217-18.

only two sets of resolutions passed by the Council for the Lake District, those from the very first two meetings, are contained in the records of the Department of Agriculture.⁷⁸

New Iceland's municipal system differed from the county system of Ontario in one other important way: elected officials performed both legislative and administrative functions. In Ontario townships, the council members had little in the way of administrative responsibility, with the important exception of superintending road construction. The township employed a number of permanent and seasonal officials such as clerks and assessors. The clerks kept all township records, made up the lists for statute labour, and made up the tax rolls. The assessor was responsible for compiling statistical information about the holdings of township residents that was used to compile the voting and taxation rolls.⁷⁹ In New Iceland, the elected members of the settlement committees—the same people responsible for drafting by-laws—performed these administrative functions. The check against abuse in the system was the radically democratic practice of requiring all proposed by-laws passed by both the district and settlement levels to be approved by a majority of the electorate at the annual public meetings held in each settlement.⁸⁰ The choice to unify legislative and administrative functions was undoubtedly made because of the colony's poverty and relatively small population; there simply were not the resources to employ permanent officials. In fact, all participation in the municipal system was done on an entirely voluntary basis; elected

⁷⁸ Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877 in LAC RG 17 A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318, Taylor to Lowe, 31 March 1877. More documents from the council may have been transmitted to the Department of the Interior, but the whereabouts of those records are currently unknown.

⁷⁹ McEvoy, *The Ontario Township*, 32-35.

⁸⁰ Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands, X and XII kaflar, *Framfari*, 14 January 1878.

officials received no remuneration for their services, except being reimbursed for the stationery that they needed to carry out their official duties.⁸¹

One of the main administrative duties of the settlement foreman was compiling statistical information about each settler in their settlement. The occupant of each household was required to provide the foreman with a detailed account of the homestead on an annual basis. This data, which included information about population, agricultural progress, the amount of capital goods held by each settler, was aggregated for each settlement and for the colony as a whole. This data served several purposes. John Taylor submitted the aggregate data from these statistical accounts to the Department of Agriculture in order to provide detailed information on the condition of the colony.⁸² River settlement foreman Jóhann Briem claimed the purpose was to inform intending emigrants in Iceland about conditions in the colony. Upon introducing the statistical form to the public in *Framfari*, he sought to assure his fellow colonists they needn't worry about this information being used to tax them, as it had been in Iceland.⁸³ The only taxation provision in the *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* was that each householder would pay a flat-tax of twenty-five cents annually into the settlement committee's coffers.⁸⁴ Still, progressive property taxation may have been planned for future implementation; the types of information were precisely the same as those compiled by the township assessor under the Ontario system, and council also realized that more substantive taxation would eventually be necessary to pay for public expenditures.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, XVI kafli *Framfari*, 14 January 1878.

⁸² See for example, John Taylor's Abstract of Statistics for 1879 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 272, docket 28126, Taylor to John Lowe, 9 February 1880.

⁸³ *Framfari*, 10 December 1877, p. 49.

⁸⁴ *Stjórnarlög Nýja Íslands* IV kafli, 7 gr. *Framfari*, 14 January 1878.

The architects of New Iceland's government clearly understood that their organization was operating outside the scope of Canadian law. They saw this situation not as an advantage, but rather as a hindrance to effective governance and progress in their colony. Björn Jónsson, foreman of the Willow Point settlement, doubted whether his countrymen would voluntarily pay even a small tax for the care of widows and orphans unless it was authorized under Canadian law.⁸⁵ It was partly for this reason that the district council formally requested legal recognition for their system from the Dominion government in the spring 1877.⁸⁶

After several months they found their champion in Minister of the Interior David Mills. Mills visited the Icelandic reserve in the autumn of 1877 and was impressed with the Icelanders' intelligence and education. After his return to Ottawa he wrote to Taylor asking for details on the "voluntary organization...for municipal purposes, which you desired should be superseded by a system having the sanction of law."⁸⁷ Based on Taylor's reply and documents forwarded from the Department of Agriculture, Mills drafted the "Keewatin Townships and Municipalities Bill," which was introduced into the House of Commons in February 1878.⁸⁸

Mills was in many ways the ideal person for the job. He was one of Canada's foremost experts on constitutional law and the British North America Act, and had been

⁸⁵ Jónasson to Taylor, 10 March 1877 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318, Taylor to Lowe, 31 March 1877.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ University of Western Ontario Archives and Research Collection Centre (ARCC), David Mills papers, reel M-1241, volume 2 p. 342, Mills to Taylor, 8 November 1877

⁸⁸ Unfortunately, the documents forwarded to the Department of the Interior by the Department of Agriculture on this issue (LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 202, docket 20830, Taylor to Lowe, 10 January 1877) have since been lost.

an advocate of extending the rights of local self-government and parliamentary representation to settlers in the Northwest during the debates over the acquisition of Rupert's Land.⁸⁹ His efforts on behalf of the Icelanders with the Keewatin Municipalities bill reflected his ideological commitment to the liberal values of self-government and local autonomy. Mills subscribed to the standard nineteenth century liberal view of municipal government as a useful tutelary device for training lower classes in the rights and duties of citizenship, and believed that the institutions created by his bill would serve a tutelary function among the Icelanders: "There is no better way to prepare the people for becoming British subjects and appreciating British institutions than to permit them to act as this Bill provides."⁹⁰ However, the bill's opponents in Parliament argued that Icelanders had to attain the formal citizenship rights of British subject through the process of naturalization before they could undergo this type of tutelage. Conservative members correctly pointed out that by granting the municipal franchise to unnaturalized aliens, a precedent was being set. Mills responded that the peculiar situation of the Northwest necessitated this new principle: "We want the country settled, and aliens can hold property. In municipal institutions you represent property and the rights of property."⁹¹ To counter objections about the openness of the franchise, Mills stated that eventually property qualifications would be instituted, but for now it was best to leave the franchise relatively open. The issues of citizenship and property rights were in fact bound up together through the stipulation added to the Dominion Lands Act in 1874 that

⁸⁹ Donald John Arnold McMurchy, "David Mills: Nineteenth Century Canadian Liberal" (PhD dissertation, University of Rochester, 1968), 38; Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government*, 8.

⁹⁰ Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (22 March 1878) at 1386.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

in order to receive patent to a homestead, the claimant had to be “a subject of Her Majesty by birth or naturalization.”⁹² None of the Icelanders in the reserve had gone through this process so their status as property holders remained in limbo. In fact, their situation as assisted immigrants living on a government sponsored reserve made patenting their homesteads extremely difficult for reasons that are detailed in the next chapter.

Although there is no known surviving copy of the original draft of the Keewatin Municipalities bill, a published copy of the amended bill does exist.⁹³ There were five main differences between the constitution drafted by the colonists and the bill that David Mills presented in the House of Commons. First, while Mills retained the same division of the colony into four municipalities, he jettisoned the institution of the district council and the offices of district council foreman and deputy district council foreman. The four municipalities were to function as separate legal entities, and the Lieutenant Governor in Council or the Manitoba Court of Queen’s Bench would settle disputes between them. Second, the formal mechanism of arbitration and dispute resolution between settlers was dropped. The bill did not include any provision for settling disputes between individuals, probably because this was not considered to be within the purview of municipal government. Third, the more radically democratic provisions of New Iceland’s constitution were reigned in. The requirement that all by-laws passed during the previous year be submitted to annual plebiscite was dropped. The minimum voting age was raised

⁹² *An Act to amend the Dominion Lands Act, Statutes of Canada, 1874 37 Vic. c.19 s.33 ss.11.*

⁹³ “Bill No. 23 An Act to establish Township Municipalities in the District of Keewatin,” Canada, *Bills of the House of Commons, 3rd Parliament, 5th Session* (Ottawa, 1878), 1-33.

from eighteen to twenty-one, and any ambiguity about the gender of eligible voters was removed by the definition of an eligible voter as "any male freeholder or householder in the municipality" (section 8). Other people excluded from voting included sheriffs or sheriffs officers, convicted felons, and those holding the office of clerk, treasurer, or collector (section 5). Exclusion of this final group would not have been possible under the New Iceland system, since the elected members of the district committees carried out the functions of each of these officers. This was not a problem under Mills' system because those duties were given to officers appointed by the elected officials, a fourth difference between the Keewatin bill and the New Iceland system. A fifth was the level of detail given to matters of election procedures, the powers of municipal councils, and the system of taxation and assessment. In the New Iceland constitution these matters are dealt with in one or two brief sections each. It is in fact unclear whether the secret ballot was used in New Iceland's elections or whether the colonists voted *viva voce*. Mills's bill specified the use of the secret ballot and laid out election procedures in such detail that the sections dealing with that topic account for the bulk of the bill (sections 9-50). Thirty different powers of municipal councils are specified in the Keewatin bill (section 55) while New Iceland's regulations are far less precise. The taxation and assessment regime are spelled out in much greater detail, as well as the procedures for seizing and redistributing property in the event of taxes going unpaid (sections 56-58, 75-82). The final difference is that the Keewatin bill makes provision for the creation of school districts and for a school levy to fund their operation (sections 83-100).

Mills's reasoning for these changes is unknown. It is likely that he wanted to create a system that generally conformed to Canadian practices, and which he believed

would work efficiently and at the same time meet the needs of the Icelandic colonists. In the House of Commons, he stated that the legislation had been framed on the Ontario municipal system at the settlers' request. However, he also noted that the sections related to municipal taxation had been drawn from the Manitoba legislation.⁹⁴ It is unknown whether the Icelanders ever saw a copy of Mills' Keewatin bill, but it is highly probable that at least the upper echelon of the colony's leadership did see it. John Lowe sent the original draft of the bill to John Taylor, who provided commentary and suggestions that were passed on to Mills.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, this train of correspondence has been lost along with most of the other documents relating to the Icelandic reserve's municipal government.⁹⁶

However, the reaction of Mills' parliamentary colleagues is available. The Keewatin Municipalities bill produced a lively debate in the House of Commons in March 1878, close to the end of the parliamentary session. The combative opposition members, already in election mode, took issue with a number of the bill's provisions and used them as a platform to discuss general issues around local governance such as the relative merit of the Ontario Municipal system versus those used in other provinces, particularly Quebec. A large part of the proceedings was an extended discussion on the value of the secret ballot in which one excited Conservative member asserted, "If a man had not sufficient manliness to come and vote openly for whom he pleased, he was not fit

⁹⁴ Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (22 March 1878) at 1393.

⁹⁵ LAC, RG 17, Semi-Official Letterbooks [hereafter A I 6], reel T-134 volume 1634 p. 36, Lowe to Taylor, 8 April 1878.

⁹⁶ It was probably part of the missing Department of the Interior file on the Icelandic reserve.

to possess the franchise.”⁹⁷ The final blow came when Peter Mitchell, an independent MP from Ontario distrusted by both parties and known for delaying the business of the House on petty matters, launched into a tirade that denounced the legislation as a useless and unnecessary expense; “the attempt of the Government to place a measure of that kind at work for 1,500 ignorant Icelanders, who never had the opportunity of understanding municipal affairs or exercising the powers to be vested in them was the most preposterous piece of legislation which had ever been submitted during his experience as a public man.”⁹⁸ This tirade and the more substantive concerns raised by opposition members resulted in the bill being left in limbo at the end of the session. In the General Election that followed a few months later, the Conservatives defeated the governing Liberals. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, who also succeeded Mills as Minister of the Interior, made no attempt to revive the bill.

Even in the absence of legal sanction from the Dominion government, the Icelanders continued to operate their system until at least 1880.⁹⁹ The colony government turned out not to be the unifying force that Sigtryggur Jónasson hoped it would be. The succession of crises afflicting the colony precipitated by sectarian religious conflict, chronic flooding, lack of material progress, and disputes over the Dominion government policies were played out in the settlement committees and district council. The political situation became increasingly polarized; those opposed to Jónasson, Taylor, and their

⁹⁷ Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (22 March 1878) at 1389.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* (26 March 1878) at 1398.

⁹⁹ *Framfari*, 24 January 1880, p. 729 contains an account of the 1880 elections. The minutes for the Árnes settlement committee end in 1880. Other committees, such as the one for the River settlement, may have continued longer, but unfortunately their records do not survive.

allies began to leave the colony for the Dakota Territory in the United States. Catastrophic flooding in 1880-81 turned the migration into a general exodus of even the most committed settlers; it is at this point that the “Lake District” may have ceased to operate. However, improved conditions and new immigration from Iceland led to the revival of local government in 1883, this time as the “County of Gimli” under the Manitoba municipal law of 1883.¹⁰⁰ Because the Lake District was in essence a county system, this change entailed no dramatic structural reorganization. However, Manitoba’s experimentation with the Ontario model was short lived; poor road conditions and sparse populations made the counties unworkable. In 1886 a new system was instituted that created smaller units called rural municipalities. This is the system that has continued, with some alterations, down to the present.¹⁰¹ The creation of the “Rural Municipality of Gimli” in 1887 was the end of the line for the institution created by the original colonists.

The Icelanders’ municipal organization clearly pushed the boundaries Canada’s constitutional order. By creating a local government and submitting it as a to Ottawa for approval, the colonists inverted the top-down approach to the delegation of state power contained in the British North America Act. In doing this they did not aspire to create an independent republic, but rather to exercise the same forms of local autonomy that existed in their home country and in Ontario. In some respects, such as the franchise, the New Iceland system was more democratic than was the case in Iceland and elsewhere in Canada. Their efforts earned them the approval of David Mills, who unsuccessfully

¹⁰⁰ *Winnipeg Daily Sun*, 14 June 1883. Magnússon, "Landnám Íslendinga í Nýja Íslandi," 37.

¹⁰¹ See Donnelly, *The Government of Manitoba*, 135-37.

attempted to bring the New Iceland system under the purview of Canadian law, albeit with his own substantive modifications.

By supporting the Icelanders, Mills and the Liberal government of Alexander Mackenzie were willing to push the boundaries of local self-government further than some of their parliamentary colleagues. However, they were not radical democrats. There was a hierarchical liberal order in which access to political rights was limited by class, gender, and race based exclusions. Mills and Mackenzie's support for the Icelanders' efforts at local-self government was contingent on the fact that the Icelanders' colony was a project of liberal colonial rule in progress; while they were not yet property holding, English-speaking, British subjects, they were considered to be on their way to becoming so, and, as such, worthy builders of settler society in the Northwest. The Icelandic colonists did not offer a challenge to a vision of the Northwest as a colonial frontier dominated by white, English-speaking, Protestant settlers, and governed according to an Ontario vision of liberal democracy. Prime Minister Mackenzie believed that out of economic necessity, the Icelanders' cultural and linguistic difference would slowly fade away, and they would become fully integrated into the Anglo-Canadian mainstream.¹⁰² Mackenzie and Mills were not so sanguine about communities in the Northwest that seemed to present more of a challenge to new order. It was their government that passed the restrictive and paternal Indian Act, and which failed to address petitions from the French Métis in the Northwest for municipal and school organization and for representation on the North-West Territories Council.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons of Canada* (26 March 1878) at 1393.

¹⁰³ Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government*, 82-83, 87.

New Iceland's municipal government was an attempt by the colonists to integrate their reserve into the state system as a political and administrative unit. The architects of the system aspired to further cement their hold on the territory and its resources reserved for them by the Dominion government over and above competing Aboriginal claims. Even though Indian and mixed blood people continued to live in and around the reserve, they were excluded from participation in local government. In fact, one of the first resolutions ever passed by the district council stated that it was "...necessary to have the Indians removed from the Icelandic Reserve particularly as the Indians also spoil the fishing in Icelanders River by blocking the mouth of the river completely with their nets."¹⁰⁴ The Icelanders positioned themselves as agents of the new settler order and sought to align themselves with its vanguard element—Anglo-Canadian settlers from Ontario. The Rev. Jón Bjarnason argued for opening the reserve up to Anglo-Canadian settlement on the grounds that they would advance agricultural and commercial progress and teach the Icelanders to be citizens of Canada. Bjarnason felt that this was necessary, because the colonists' current neighbours were, "for the most part half-breeds, who have not yet made progress...in those matters most essential for Icelanders to learn."¹⁰⁵ The exclusion of the Icelanders from certain civil and political rights until such time as they became naturalized British subjects to some extent paralleled the status of Aboriginal people who had not gone through the process of enfranchisement. The same sorts of paternal metaphors about minority and tutelage were at play, although at different levels. Men such as David Mills felt that the Icelanders needed only a brief apprenticeship

¹⁰⁴ Jónasson to Taylor, 28 March 1877 in LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 187, docket 19318, Taylor to Lowe, 31 March 1877.

¹⁰⁵ *Framfari*, 16 July 1878, pp. 298-301.

before they could become full participants in the liberal order. The Icelanders themselves, or at least their leaders, were determined to overcome their political disabilities at the earliest possible moment. Sigtryggur Jónasson stated that the Icelanders should not regard themselves “as underage children or helpless dependents” but rather as “...full-grown men, capable of directing our own affairs.”¹⁰⁶ Governing their local affairs according to a system that reinforced the principles of liberal governance order was vital to this effort.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 10 December 1877, p. 59.

Chapter 7
**“Freemen Serving No Overlord”: Debt, Self-Reliance, Liberty,
 and the Limits of Exclusivity**

In September 1877, Lord Dufferin made a special visit to the embattled Icelandic colony as part of his tour of the Northwest. Even though the quarantine had been lifted, and the Icelanders were free to leave their reserve in search of work, fears that the colony was contaminated by smallpox or some other disease persisted. The Manitoba government quietly discouraged the Governor General in his plan and the Hudson’s Bay Company only reluctantly transported him to Gimli aboard their steamer *Colville*. Dufferin walked through the village and then traveled a mile west along one of the rough-hewn roads that the settlers had cut through the forest. He visited three farms along the road, where he entered their houses, inspected their contents and chatted with the inhabitants about their present conditions and hopes for the future. In his official address at Gimli, Dufferin urged the Icelanders to struggle on through the difficult times. If they persevered, he assured them, in Canada they would be “freemen serving no overlord, and being no man’s men but your own; each master of his own farm...”¹

Icelandic men had not become free, Dufferin implied, simply by virtue of their migration to Canada. True liberty existed only in a possible future that had as its precondition the acquisition of property—their 160 acre homesteads. In the case of the Icelandic reserve, those homesteads had to be carved out of the bush acre by agonizing acre and brought into agricultural production. According to the *Dominion Lands Act* regulations governing western colonization, these lands would be granted to the settler ‘free’ provided basic conditions were met. But in reality there was a heavy price to be

¹ *Manitoba Free Press*, 17 September 1877, p. 2.

paid in labour and time, and the final reward could remain elusive. Among the farms Dufferin visited was *Nýibær* (New farm), the home of Páll Jónsson, Ólöf Níelsdóttir and their nine children who came from Iceland in the summer of 1876. They had little capital with which to commence homesteading, and therefore relied heavily on the loan provided by the Canadian government. By 1879, the family's labour had resulted in the fulfillment of the basic conditions for obtaining patent to their homestead. However, according to another section of the Act created specifically for group settlement schemes such as the Icelandic reserve, Páll was required to repay his \$574.44 debt to the government before he could obtain the patent. This was well beyond the family's means, and when flooding forced him and many of the other colonists out of the Willow Creek settlement in 1880, Páll left the dream of being "master of his own farm" behind.²

Páll Jónsson's predicament was shared by hundreds of other Icelandic colonists who felt that, for whatever reason, their situation in the reserve had become untenable. Because of the way the Dominion Land rules were administered, leaving the reserve meant forfeiting almost everything one had worked for. Until 1883, obtaining a land patent was not possible simply by fulfilling one's homestead duties and faithfully paying the requisite fee; it also required clearing a debt owed to the government for material assistance during the first years of settlement. Officials in the Department of Agriculture referred to this arrangement as a 'mortgage,' but in practice the loan functioned more like an indenture contract characteristic of colonization schemes in earlier periods—complete with limitations on personal freedom that such contracts had traditionally entailed. The repayment of the government loan became one of the most divisive issues in the colony,

² Thorleifur Jóakimsson Jackson, *Framhald á Landnámsögu Nýja Íslands* (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1923), 26.

particularly when some settlers began leaving for Dakota in 1878 and 1879. The debate, which was played out in the pages of the colony's newspaper *Framfari* (The Progressive), pitted the government agents John Taylor and Sigtryggur Jónasson against those who advocated the abandonment of the colony. In essence, this debate was about whether the Icelanders' freedom of movement could be impaired by their debt, or whether the *de facto* possession and improvement of land, even in the absence of legal title, gave them rights as property holders that helped to balance out their obligations as debtors. In time, virtually all of New Iceland's colonists came to share the view that their labour and improvements entitled them to equity in their homesteads that should be respected by the Government, regardless of their indebtedness.

This chapter explores the link between the government loan and the transfer of property rights to reserve lands from the Dominion government to individual Icelanders. Without the loan, it is unlikely that the colonization scheme ever would have happened. Government support was absolutely essential in launching the colony and providing basic subsistence to the colonists during their first two years. Icelandic ethnic historians have repeatedly recounted this suffering, without fully interrogating its root causes. The suffering of the first New Iceland settlers is said to be part of a shared narrative of sacrifice and ultimate perseverance by a stalwart pioneer generation that has helped bind subsequent generations together into a cohesive ethnic community.³ However, some of the settlers themselves were not silent on the cause of their problems; 1875 pioneer Símon Símonarson considered it to be the result of particular decisions taken by the colony's leadership. "The people suffered for years to come from the improvident way in

³ See David Arnason and Vincent Arnason, eds., *The New Icelanders: A North American Community* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), 3-8.

which preparations were made for the settlement.”⁴ The aim here is to link those dire conditions to policies and ideas emanating from Ottawa, and circulating among the colonists themselves. Active government support for colonization schemes was considered at best a necessary and temporary evil; assistance should be granted in the interests of promoting immigration and colonization, but not to such an extent that would discourage self-sufficiency. Officials in Ottawa intended to transform the Icelanders into independent citizens, possessed of property and imbued with liberal values of thrift, industry, and self-reliance. This was not simply an idea thrust onto the immigrants from above; the loan became a catalyst for an internal debate about the rights and obligations of the individual in a liberal society.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the tensions generated by the government’s linking repayment of the loan to the transfer of property rights in reserve lands. These two issues cannot be disaggregated from one another; they were quite literally linked through a little-studied provision in the *Dominion Lands Act* of 1874 relating to group settlements.⁵ The tensions became most acute when some of the settlers contemplated leaving the reserve, and John Taylor imposed coercive measures to keep ‘government property’ in the reserve. Many among the disaffected had deep ideological commitments to liberalism and believed that by making the price of leaving the reserve the forfeiture of compensation for all improvements and the surrender of any goods and chattels obtained through the loan, the government was impinging on their individual liberty. One settler who ran afoul of Taylor, former Icelandic parliamentarian Björn

⁴ University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections [hereafter UMASC] Simon Simonarson fonds, Mss 34 (A.80-04). Translation by Wilhelm Kristjanson.

⁵ *Statutes of Canada*, 1874, 37 Vic. c. 19 s. 14 & 15. See Canada, *Dominion Lands Act, consolidated, May 1876* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printers, 1876), 46.

Pétursson, mused whether the Icelanders' situation in the reserve amounted to them being "serfs on the land."⁶ By invoking serfdom, Björn was pointing to the ambiguous position of himself and his fellow colonists with respect to the Canadian state; they were, on the one hand, encouraged to become liberal subjects, owners of property enjoying the full rights of citizenship. However, for the time being their indebtedness excluded them from the promises of liberalism and seemed to lock them into a form of indentured apprenticeship on their reserve. The issues explored in this chapter thus provide a ringside view into the untidy process through which the Icelandic immigrant's place in Canada's liberal order was negotiated and contested.

* * *

The colonization of the Icelandic reserve could not have occurred when it did without the support of the Canadian government. Between 1875 and 1879, approximately 1,500 immigrants were brought to the Icelandic reserve with assistance from the Department of Agriculture. Most of these people arrived with very little capital. Few were able to pay for the long and expensive journey to Winnipeg. Fewer still could afford the necessary tools, implements, and livestock to immediately begin homesteading, not to mention the provisions necessary to sustain them until the first harvest. After transport, outfitting, and provision, there was still the matter of freighting goods, chattel and supplies to the reserve. This was an expensive proposition in 1875; the Icelandic reserve was beyond the existing road network of Manitoba, and water routes were unavailable when the ice on the Lake was forming or breaking up in the fall and

⁶ *Framfari*, 29 March 1879, pp. 526-528. Page numbers refer to the published translation. See George Houser, ed. *Framfari: 1877 to 1880* (Gimli, MB: Gimli Chapter Icelandic National League of North America, 1986).

spring. Guðlaugur Magnússon, who was among the first settlers in 1875, stated that had the government not loaned the Icelanders considerable sums of money, the colonization of New Iceland would not have happened when it did. He and the approximately 280 other colonists relied almost totally on provisions obtained through the loan in order to survive their first winter. But even with this assistance, life in the winter of 1875-76 was characterized by crowded accommodations, insufficient food, and numerous deaths from disease.⁷

Given the difficulties experienced by the Icelanders, it is fair to ask why the Canadian government actively facilitated their relocation in the fall 1875. The Liberal Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie and his cabinet were not ignorant to the danger of sending a relatively large group, consisting mainly of families with young children, into a new colony far from established settlements at the onset of winter. In the first instance, they felt as though they needed to do something to assist the Icelanders in Ontario. They could not leave them to winter in Ontario, because the possibility of them finding enough work seemed remote, and the provincial Commissioner of Immigration had renounced all responsibility for their welfare. The federal government supporting immigrants settled in Ontario was not an option that received serious consideration, because of the potential conflict of jurisdictions, and for fear of setting a precedent. Transportation to Manitoba and the North-west Territories was therefore the only viable solution.⁸ But at the same time, it was clear that they could not be left in Winnipeg for the winter, since there was

⁷ Guðlaugur Magnússon, "Landnám Íslendinga í Nýja Íslandi," *Almanak Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson* (1899): 30-31.

⁸ Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Privy Council Office fonds, RG 2 [hereafter RG 2], "Orders-in-Council" series [hereafter A 1 a], reel C-3313, volume 337, PC 1875-0889.

neither work nor suitable housing to accommodate a group of that size in the city of 5,000. The only option left was to send them to their chosen colony with enough provisions to last them through the winter.

By granting assistance, the Mackenzie government felt that they could minimize the potential dangers of the scheme, while at the same time serving the government's policy goals for immigration and colonization. The Icelandic reserve advanced the project of re-settling the Northwest with European-origin agriculturalists. The government expected that once the Icelandic colony was firmly established it would attract further immigration from Iceland. However, granting assistance to the colony also presented a policy problem. It was the official policy of the Department of Agriculture that after transport to their final destination, the federal government's responsibility toward immigrants was at an end.⁹ The provision of loans or other forms of assistance to aid in colonization was left to either the provinces or to private entities interested in colonization for ethno-religious reasons or as a land speculation. As an example of the former, the French Canadian migrants from New England who came to Manitoba during the 1870s received some assistance from the Dominion government, but the majority of their care after arrival was left in the hands *Société de Colonisation de Manitoba*, an organization headed by Archbishop Alexandre Antonin Taché and other prominent Franco-Manitobans.¹⁰ Some equivalent private group would have to be found to help shoulder the burden of Icelandic colonization.

⁹ Norman P. Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1966), 90-91.

¹⁰ See A. I. Silver, "French Canada and the Prairie Frontier, 1870-1890," *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (1969): 11-36; Robert Painchaud, "The Catholic Church and the Movement of Francophones to the Canadian Prairies 1870-1915" (PhD

It was the Mennonites from Russia that provided the immediate precedent for the government's approach to the Icelandic colonization scheme. The Mennonites settled in southeastern Manitoba in 1874, with the assistance of the Canadian government and their long established co-religionists in southern Ontario. Even though the Mennonites from Russia were relatively well-off, it was recognized by their Ontario friends that colonization was an expensive and risky business that required contingency plans. The Department of Agriculture estimated the cost of provisioning a family of five through the winter at \$90. Including the basic outfit required to begin farming brought the total cost per family up \$135.¹¹ In 1876, the 1339 Mennonites who arrived in Toronto had a total of \$119,000 or \$88.87 per capita.¹² By comparison, the 1162 Icelanders in the same year brought only \$8,026 or \$6.91 per capita.¹³

J.Y. Shantz, chairman of 'the Committee of Management of Mennonites in Ontario,' therefore arranged for a federal government loan, which was to be guaranteed by the long-established Mennonite communities of Ontario. The Committee signed a bond, according to the terms of which they were to be advanced up to \$100,000, which they in turn would distribute as needed among the Mennonite colonists in Manitoba. The loan was granted for ten years at a rate of six percent interest, with no payments for principal or interest demanded during the first four years. After four years the principal

dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1976); Kenneth Michael Sylvester, *The Limits of Rural Capitalism: Family, Culture, and Markets in Montcalm, Manitoba, 1870-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 13-14.

¹¹ LAC, Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17 [hereafter RG 17], "Reports and Memoranda" series [hereafter A I 13], reel T-1011, volume 1976, p. 363, John Lowe to R.W. Scott, 8 August 1876.

¹² Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 201.

¹³ LAC, RG 17, A I 13, reel T-1011, volume 1976, p. 250, John Lowe to R.W. Scott, 27 July 1876.

and interest were to be capitalized, and interest would continue to be charged at a rate of six percent per annum. The bond stipulated that during the last six years of the loan annual payments would be made to the Receiver General of Canada until the loan and all interest charges had been paid off.¹⁴ Because of crop failures due to grasshoppers and frosts during the first years, the Mennonites, particularly those with little means, had to draw heavily on the loan. However, the Mennonite settlers in Manitoba were able to pay off their loan by 1892, with the help of a sixty percent reduction in the principal and a complete waiving of the interest charges, negotiated in 1880.¹⁵

Through this bond process, the Dominion government hedged its bets on the success or failure of Mennonite colonization by involving a private third party. If everything went well, the loan would be repaid by the new settlers. If it didn't, the existing Mennonite community with deep roots in Canada would absorb the majority of the losses. However, there was one sizeable problem that stood in the way of replicating this method in the case of the Icelandic reserve—there was no large, wealthy, and long-established community in Canada affiliated with the Icelanders that could fulfill the same role as the Mennonite Committee of Ontario. In the absence of a third party interested for ethnic or religious reasons, the government attempted to substitute a mercantile firm with new-found speculative interest in western lands—the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). This process was instigated by John Taylor, during the visit of the Icelandic Deputation to Winnipeg in August 1875. Taylor claimed to have reached a verbal agreement with James A. Grahame, Chief Commissioner of the HBC at Fort Garry, to

¹⁴ Printed form of the Mennonite bond, included in LAC, RG 17, "Secret and Confidential Correspondence" series [hereafter A I 4], volume 1629, Confidential Memorandum, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 17 October 1876.

¹⁵ Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 226.

guarantee a loan up to \$100,000 to the Icelandic immigrants on the same terms as the Mennonite bond.¹⁶ When Taylor returned to Ottawa and reported this arrangement to officials in the Department of Agriculture, he was told that something more than a verbal arrangement would be required if the project was to go ahead. Written confirmation was not forthcoming from the HBC so Taylor penned a detailed letter to Grahame spelling out terms of the agreement and stressing the necessity for prompt action, as the season was already late, and therefore the time available for moving the people to the colony was running out. Taylor implied that the Icelanders' homesteads would be security for the Company—if the settlers defaulted on their repayment, the HBC would get their lands and all improvements.¹⁷ In reply, Chief Factor J.H. McTavish, acting in Grahame's absence, sent a telegram to Ottawa on 14 September 1875 stating “the Hudson's Bay Company will receive & guarantee advances made to the Icelanders in the terms of the printed Mennonite bond.”¹⁸

In a confidential departmental memo, John Lowe stated that the support of the H.B.C. was the decisive factor in convincing the government to go ahead with the colonization scheme in the fall of 1875: “this sanction of the Hudson Bay Company, really led to the formation of the Icelandic colony at Gimli, they being presumed to have intimate local knowledge of the proposed site and the means it possessed to support the Icelanders which the Department could not have. I may say, in fact, that the project of

¹⁶ LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Confidential Memorandum, John Lowe to R.W. Scott, 17 October 1876.

¹⁷ Taylor to J.A. Grahame, 3 September 1875 in LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Confidential Memorandum, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 17 October 1876.

¹⁸ J.H. McTavish to the Minister of Agriculture, 14 September 1875 in LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Confidential Memorandum, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 17 October 1876.

this Colony would not have been acted upon in the absence of such sanction.”¹⁹ This statement seems to be borne out by the fact that Taylor was given instructions to commence the removal of the Icelanders from Ontario the day after the telegram from McTavish was received.²⁰ On 20 September 1875, an Order-in-Council was passed recommending that the guarantee of the HBC be accepted for the \$2,500 already advanced to the Icelanders in Ontario, and a further \$5,000 for provisions until the first harvest. The figure \$5,000 was chosen for the amount of the loan, based on the assumption that there would be fifty families, and that \$100 would maintain them for a year.²¹

This hastily crafted plan was soon thrown into disarray when the HBC reversed itself and refused to take on the role of guarantor of the Icelandic loan. Commissioner Grahame later claimed that his initial conversations with Taylor included nothing about a bond. He had agreed to the plan in principle because he imagined that the company’s business would benefit as the monopoly supplier to a new colony with access to government cash. He added that the lands in the Icelandic reserve were of little use to the company as a security, because if the Icelanders could not succeed there, it was unlikely that any willing purchaser would be found. But in spite of his objections to the bond, Grahame agreed to advance \$5,300 to Taylor’s personal credit for transportation and supplies, with the expectation that the company would be reimbursed for the advances by the government without becoming financial liable for the failure of the Icelandic

¹⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Confidential Memorandum, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 17 October 1876.

²⁰ LAC, RG 17, “General Letterbooks” series [hereafter A I 2], volume 1513, p. 3, Lowe to Taylor, 15 September 1875.

²¹ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, reel C-3313, volume 338, PC 1875-0976.

settlement.²² Throughout much of 1876, the government clung to the hope that it could persuade the HBC to sign the bond and accept responsibility for the Icelanders. At the same time, the company's man in Ottawa, Selkirk M.P. Donald A. Smith, pushed for this reimbursement. Ultimately it was the government that relented; in August 1877 the government reimbursed the \$5,300 to the company, ending the government's hope of replicating the Mennonite colonization plan.²³ From this point on, the government had sole responsibility for the Icelandic colony, both financially and morally. Other than the government, the Icelanders had virtually no friends in Canada capable of assisting them. If the government wanted to recover the loans it had granted to the Icelanders—which it did—repayment would have to come directly from them. The settlers therefore had to be both given further assistance and encouraged to ultimately become self-supporting.

By the spring of 1877, John Lowe testified before the Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization that the failure of the Icelandic colony had become a distinct possibility.²⁴ As bad weather, crop failure, poor fishing, a lack of employment, and consequent hunger and disease took their toll, the government was forced to extend more and more money to prevent starvation and death. In large measure, it was the desire to keep costs down that ultimately led to this larger expenditure. Officials in the Department of Agriculture were concerned by the Icelander's lack of capital, but did not take it seriously into consideration when calculating the amounts which the colony would require. In the case of the Mennonites, who did have some capital, the government loan

²² D.A. Smith to Lowe, 18 January 1876 in LAC, RG 17, A I 4, volume 1629, Confidential Memorandum, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 17 October 1876.

²³ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, reel C-3320, volume 359, PC 1877-813.

²⁴ "Report of the Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization," in Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 1877, p. 5.

was their insurance against adverse conditions. For the Icelanders, it was their sole means of support; they were operating without a net. In the various memorandums that passed back and forth in the Department of Agriculture in Ottawa, the question of what would happen if the situation in the colony deteriorated due to circumstances beyond the control of the settlers was not part of the deliberations. As a result, the government responded in a largely ad hoc manner as various crises arose, such as the smallpox epidemic of 1876-77. This resulted in \$25,000 being added to the loan amount, the single largest disbursement of all the monies granted to the Icelandic colony.²⁵

The Department of Agriculture's estimates of the Icelandic colony's needs were based almost entirely on their experience with the Mennonites. However, greater efficiencies were looked for at every turn. For example, John Lowe claimed that the amount required for the Icelanders could be reduced from the estimates for Mennonites because the former were living next to a lake full of fish, and because many of the men were believed to be earning good wages working on railway construction in Manitoba.²⁶ Authorization for the purchase of necessary provision was sometimes delayed in hopes that other arrangements could be made which would save the government money. Lowe attempted to have a loan granted to Manitoba farmers affected by grasshoppers in 1874-75 to be repaid in produce which could then be redistributed to the Icelanders.²⁷ This plan caused considerable delays in transporting the necessary winter provisions to the colony.

²⁵ LAC, RG 2, A 1 a, reel C-3319, volume 355, PC 1877-296.

²⁶ LAC, RG 17, A-I-13, reel T-1011, volume 197, p. 290, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 18 September 1876.

²⁷ LAC, RG 17, "General Correspondence" series [hereafter A I 1], volume 169, docket 17528, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 23 September 1876.

The events of the winter of 1875-76 serve to illustrate how attempts on the part of the government to maintain “rigid economy” were ultimately self-defeating and led to considerable suffering among the settlers. The Department of Agriculture estimated that it cost about \$90 to maintain a family of five through the winter.²⁸ The government therefore had approved a loan of \$5,000 based on the assumption that only fifty families would be settling on the reserve in the fall of 1875, giving the apparently comfortable cushion of \$100 per family. This proved to be a terrible underestimation of the required resources, as the number of families who actually went to the reserve in the fall of 1875 was eighty, therefore reducing the amount per family to only \$62.50. Only fifteen days after arriving at Gimli, Taylor informed Lowe that “a larger amount of provision will be necessary to preserve the people from want and suffering through the winter.”²⁹ Lowe replied no further aid would be forthcoming, “There is good will to help your colony, but the difficulties of principle are very great, and in fact I have now a ministerial order to tell you, that nothing further can be done by the Government.”³⁰ By January 1876 Taylor was making urgent appeals to the Hudson’s Bay Company and Alexander Morris, Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba and the North-west Territories.³¹ He also continued to press the government for further assistance, underlining the seriousness of the situation.

²⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 13, reel T-1011, volume 197, p. 250, and Lowe to R.W. Scott, 27 July 1876, and p.290, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 18 September 1876.

²⁹ LAC, RG 17, A 11, volume 145, docket 15147, Taylor to Lowe, 6 November 1875.

³⁰ LAC, John Lowe fonds, MG 29, E18, volume 4, Lowe to Taylor, 16 December 1875.

³¹ Archives of Manitoba [hereafter AM], Alexander Morris fonds, MG 12, B1, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1191A, Taylor to Morris, 10 January 1876. Hudson’s Bay Company Archives [hereafter HBCA], D.20/6-7, Commissioner's Inward Correspondence (General), no. 50, John Taylor to Chief Commissioner J.A. Grahame, 10 January 1876.

Taylor believed that the colonists were on the verge of revolt. “The fear of suffering from starvation has become so great that I am necessitated to telegraph for further supplies in order to allay the feeling. Unless I do so, I feel assured that they will soon take matters in their own hands and speedily become disorganized.”³² Sufficiently convinced of the seriousness of the situation, the government acceded to granting another \$5,000 in provisions.³³ While these supplies saved the Icelanders from starvation, they did not prevent the onset of diseases of malnutrition, particularly scurvy. Approximately thirty-five people are believed to have died during the winter and spring; the infirm, children and nursing mothers were the most seriously affected. One couple lost seven of their nine children.³⁴

In the summer of 1876, the colony’s population was augmented by the arrival of approximately 1,000 more immigrants from Iceland. The government again sought to minimize costs for their maintenance during the winter, but this time was more cognizant of the dangers. As Lowe privately told Taylor, “If any serious suffering takes place, & deaths occur from it the fort would be again on fire, and all our grand colonization projects will go by the board.”³⁵ Nonetheless, the crisis of the smallpox epidemic again forced the government to advance more money to save the colonists from starvation. Because of the quarantine regulations, Icelanders in the reserve were unable to travel to Manitoba in search of work and therefore survived solely on government aid and

³² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 151, docket 15109, Taylor to Lowe, 9 February 1876.

³³ LAC, John Lowe fonds, MG 29, E18, volume 4, Lowe to Taylor, 23 February 1876.

³⁴ Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, vol. 3 (Winnipeg: Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1945), 25.

³⁵ LAC, John Lowe fonds, MG 29, E18, volume 4, Lowe to Taylor, 2 October 1876.

whatever fish they could catch from the lake. This helped swell the costs associated with the settlement to nearly \$100,000 by the spring of 1877, far more money than the thrifty Mackenzie government had envisioned spending when the colonization scheme was launched in the fall of 1875.³⁶ Slightly more than half of this amount was classed as a loan; the portions for some transportation, feeding at immigration stations, and for the salaries and expenses of the Icelandic agents Taylor and Sigtryggur Jónasson were considered to be normal costs of facilitating migration and settlement. Prime Minister Mackenzie had wanted to make the Icelanders repay the cost of building a colonization road connecting Gimli to Manitoba during the winter of 1876-77, but the road was ultimately categorized as a permanent public work.³⁷ The loan amount was the portion for supply and provision, which totaled more than \$54,000 by the time government aid was formally cut off by the government in May 1877.³⁸ News of the last installment of \$25,000 was communicated to Taylor by Lowe in both official and private letters. The private letter contained the stern warning that the colony was “on its last trial, in as far as Government aid is concerned” and that there were going to be serious consequences for all involved if the colony should prove to be a failure.

I expect you to make such exertions as will induce the people to make a supreme effort to establish themselves with this last aid seeing that no more can be had from the Government I say for my sake, because if the Colony is not successful, the strong advice which I have given to the Ministers respecting it, and has been one reason for inducing the expenditure of about \$100,000 would constitute one of the most serious official mistakes of my life. And I say for your sake, because it would probably involve the breaking up of Official relations, and throwing to the ground

³⁶ LAC, RG 17, “Semi-Official Letterbooks” series [hereafter A-I-6], reel T-132, volume 1633, p. 217, Lowe to Taylor, 2 May 1877.

³⁷ LAC, RG 17, A I 13, reel T-1011, volume 1976, p. 376, Lowe to Burpee, 7 February 1877.

³⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 13, reel T-1013, volume 1982, p. 192, Memorandum: Icelandic Expenditure, n.d.

your Castle in Spain. Of the poor people themselves the case is also in the last degree serious, as if it does not actually involve the issues of life and death it does involve bitterness, disappointment, and misery.³⁹

Given the suffering of the Icelanders during their first two winters, why did the government not simply grant money to the colonists rather than charging the costs of their basic subsistence to them as a loan? In part this decision was based on the desire of the government to minimize costs during a period of severe economic depression.⁴⁰ It was also a matter of policy and precedent; the Department of Agriculture was routinely bombarded with requests from various parties to support their migration and settlement in the west. The government's policy was to give assistance only to new immigrants, and not to British subjects currently residing in other parts of the Dominion. Giving what was perceived as lavish support to the Icelanders opened the government and public servants to criticism, as John Lowe's comments above attest.⁴¹ But underpinning the political and financial considerations was the fundamental liberal belief that individuals are responsible for their own well being, and must not look to government for their support. If the government gave the Icelanders too much assistance it would undermine their ability to become self-supporting citizens of the Dominion. This ideological perspective made it easy for the government to blame the Icelanders, or any other immigrants, for their own misfortune when the colony faltered.⁴² John Lowe told Taylor, "the Government have been informed that the Icelanders don't work, that they have not the habits of thrift and industry, that they are not agriculturalists, and that they have even

³⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 6, reel T-132, volume 1633, p. 217, Lowe to Taylor, 2 May 1877.

⁴⁰ Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization*, 121-22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 213.

neglected to catch fish at their own doors.”⁴³ Taylor was instructed to withhold what government funds he had left from all the able-bodied colonists in order to force them to get some kind of work. This would enable them to not only be self-supporting, but also take steps toward repaying their portion of the loan.

The legal means for the government to secure repayment of the loan was contained in two clauses added to the Dominion Lands Act in 1874 in order to encourage group settlement.⁴⁴ These additions were designed to break down a perceived barrier to settlement—lack of access to capital by incoming colonists—while at the same time encouraging capital investment in Dominion Lands in the Northwest. The first new clause gave the Minister of the Interior power to reserve from general settlement any townships on which individuals and groups settled at least sixty-four families “free of expense to the Government.” Individual settlers in such group settlements were still subject to the same homestead regulations set down under the original 1872 act—heads of households were entitled to receive a 160 acre quarter section free, as long as they resided on their claim for three years, fulfilled the basic requirements for improvement, and paid a \$10 administration fee. However, what the act aimed to do was encourage capital investment in colonization, by making homestead lands security against advances to settlers. While the land might have technically been granted free, settlers often required assistance to meet their basic needs for provision and supply. An individual or group sponsoring a settlement of two townships would need to loan settlers without capital some funds to establish their homesteads. Sponsors could expect to lend

⁴³ LAC, RG 17, A I 6, reel T-132, volume 1633, p. 217, Lowe to Taylor, 2 May 1877.

⁴⁴ *Statutes of Canada*, 1874, 37 Vic. c. 19 s. 14 & 15.

approximately \$17,280 to establish the required number of settlers.⁴⁵ In compensation for undertaking such an outlay, those putting up the initial capital would have the special right to purchase additional lands in the township for themselves at a reduced price.

The second new clause permitted the organizers to recoup money advanced to settlers for transport, supply, or provision during initial settlement, up to the amount of \$200, with the 160 acres standing as security. The patent to the land could not be issued until the debt was cleared. If settlers vacated their homesteads in the reserve and took up other homesteads elsewhere the debt would follow them, and the patent for the subsequent homestead would also be withheld until the debt was paid.⁴⁶ Although it was not stated in the Act, presumably colonization schemes such as those of the Mennonites and Icelanders were classed as “free of expense to the Government” because repayment of the loans granted was supposed to be guaranteed by third parties. Together, third party guarantors and securitized homestead lands were seen as a sensible and efficient way of off-loading the costs of potentially risky group colonization schemes on Dominion Lands in the Northwest.

The railway land grant policies of the United States were the inspiration for this addition to the Dominion Lands Act. In the U.S. the federal government granted large tracts of land to railway companies who then undertook to recruit, transport, and settle immigrants on those lands. These companies sold land to the immigrants, taking

⁴⁵ Based on the Department of Agriculture’s estimate of \$135 to provision and supply a family of five for one year. See LAC, RG 17, A I 13, reel T-1011, volume 1976, p. 363, John Lowe to R.W. Scott, 8 August 1876.

⁴⁶ *Statutes of Canada*, 1874, 37 Vic. c. 19 s. 14 & 15.

mortgages on improvements as security.⁴⁷ Department of Agriculture Secretary John Lowe was a proponent of this form of colonization, and formally recommended it to Secretary of State R.W. Scott. “Advances to assist Colonization secured by a lien on the Colonists improved land has been the general mode successfully pursued, for many years in settling the railway companies lands in the Western states. The Northern Pacific Railway Co. is now advertising free passage to families who will settle on their lands.”⁴⁸ The railway companies aimed to both recoup their initial outlay for recruiting and settling the immigrants, and sell the land they had received free from the government.

The 1874 Dominion Lands Act amendment acknowledged the start-up costs inherent in settling on ‘free’ homestead lands. For settlers without capital, the cost of basic subsistence had to be met somehow, and the loan provision provided the means. However, if the settlement turned out to be a disappointment, settlers could be left with debts well in excess of the value of their lands. This was the case with the majority of the Icelandic settlers who came to the reserve in 1875 and 1876. Most families accumulated debts close to or in excess of the supposed maximum of \$200. For example, Páll Jónsson of Nýibær owed the government \$574.44. Although Páll and his family had made substantial improvements to their homestead since in 1876, by 1880 they were faced with a difficult choice. In order to patent the land the family would have to pay off their debt to the government. This was a difficult task for cash-poor settlers who still had few marketable commodities. However, even if paying off their debt and obtaining a patent for Nýibær was possible, it was not necessarily in their best interests. The future of the

⁴⁷ *Report of the Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization*, 1878, pp. 20-21

⁴⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 13, reel T-1011, volume 1976, p. 273, Lowe to R.W. Scott, 10 August 1876.

settlement—and therefore the future market value of the land—was in question. Would they be better off leaving the Icelandic reserve and starting again somewhere else? This was a question faced by many New Icelanders between 1879 and 1881.

In the Icelandic reserve there was considerable confusion over the precise meaning of these provisions in the Dominion Lands Act. First, although the legislation referred to the debt as “a charge against the homestead” many settlers believed that the debt was a mortgage. This confusion appears to have been largely the responsibility of John Lowe who referred to the arrangement as the settlers giving “mortgages on their improvements” before a parliamentary committee.⁴⁹ This raised the question of whether improvements to the land gave the settlers equity that would be considered in the repayment of their debts. Second, the Act did not answer the question of what happened to moveable property obtained through the government loan. In addition to provisions, the government loan was used to obtain implements and livestock for the settlers. If settlers chose to leave the Icelandic reserve, could they legally take implements and animals obtained through the government loan with them? Both of these issues became highly contentious and the colonists were split into opposing factions. One side held out hope that conditions in the colony would get better with time if only a little more work was put in, while the other claimed that there was no future in New Iceland and it would be best to move elsewhere at the first opportunity.

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⁴⁹ “Report of the Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization,” in Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 1878, pp. 20-21.

Two of the principal antagonists lived on adjacent lots along Icelfander' River. On one side was Sigtryggur Jónasson, who resided at Möðruvellir, a place he named for the administrative hub in northern Iceland where he had been apprenticed as a secretary to the District Governor.⁵⁰ Although he was only twenty-six years old in 1879, Sigtryggur was one of the most powerful and influential men in the Icelandic reserve. He was the Canadian government's "Assistant Icelandic Agent" and official translator. John Taylor could not speak Icelandic and thus relied heavily on Sigtryggur to communicate the directives he had received from Ottawa. Sigtryggur was also entrusted with the task of keeping the ledger books that recorded the indebtedness of each settler.⁵¹ When the Icelanders held the first elections for their newly organized municipal council early in 1877, Sigtryggur became the first *þingráðstjóri* (District Council Foreman, or County Warden). At roughly the same time he was instrumental in founding the New Iceland Printing Company which began publishing *Framfari* beginning in September 1877. In March 1878 Sigtryggur resigned his position as District Council foreman over allegations of vote rigging and was succeeded by the *varaþingráðstjóri* (vice-District Council Foreman) Ólafur Ólafsson of Ós, Sigtryggur's next door neighbour.⁵²

Ólafur was part of the colony's leadership group, and initially was closely associated with John Taylor. He was among the first group of settlers at Gimli in 1875 and is credited with giving the place its name.⁵³ Ólafur had experience in local government, having previously been appointed reeve of his district in Iceland. In January

⁵⁰ Nelson S. Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga* (Arborg, MB: Saga Publications, 1985), 221.

⁵¹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 231, docket 23765, Taylor to Lowe, 9 September 1878.

⁵² *Framfari*, 4 February 1879, p. 443.

⁵³ Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga*, 211.

1876 he was elected to the five-man *bæjarnefnd* (village committee) and in March, at Taylor's suggestion, was appointed Justice of the Peace for the North-West Territories.⁵⁴ When talk of leaving New Iceland for Dakota began in 1878, Ólafur did not openly come out in favour of it. However, it is clear that he sympathized with the efforts of the Lutheran Pastor Páll Þorláksson to help the struggling settlers leave New Iceland and start over in the United States, and he himself made plans to leave. By the time of the colony elections in early 1879, many of the disaffected considered Ólafur to be their spokesman. In the pages of *Framfari*, Sigtryggur Jónasson clung desperately to the belief that Ólafur was not working with Páll Þorláksson to undermine the colony, in spite of his personal intentions to leave.⁵⁵ Almost immediately afterward came the explosive revelation that Ólafur and Páll had secretly co-authored and distributed a petition to the Canadian government which was signed by 130 colonists, expressing their dissatisfaction with the Icelandic reserve. Feeling that their trust had been betrayed, Sigtryggur and his allies on the council accused Ólafur of having violated the principles of the colony's governing regulations, and forced him to resign his position as chairman.⁵⁶ Shortly thereafter, Ólafur left the colony for the Dakota Territory, never to return to New Iceland. The petition was denounced in the pages of *Framfari*, where it was scathingly referred to as the "Secret Deal letter."⁵⁷ In a letter to John Lowe explaining the issue, Taylor

⁵⁴ AM, MG 12, B1, Alexander Morris fonds, Lieutenant Governor's Collection, Correspondence, no. 1227, Taylor to Morris, 1 March 1876.

⁵⁵ *Framfari*, 6 March 1879, pp. 498-499.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 March 1879, p. 510.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 July 1879, pp. 620-628.

claimed that Páll Þorláksson had used Ólafur as his pawn, exploiting his popularity among the settlers to obtain signatures.⁵⁸

The petition was critical of the way Taylor and Sigtryggur had administered the government loan, and accused them of a lack of transparency; “It never came to [our] knowledge what rules and regulations have been prescribed by the Government as to the management and distribution of the loan therefore we can not say whether it has been used so as to suit [the] creditors purpose or not, especially as we have not yet been able to obtain any accounts of its distribution from the part of the Agents.”⁵⁹ When asked by John Lowe to respond to the allegations in the petition, Taylor attempted to portray its authors as lazy malcontents who blindly followed the lead of their “disturbing priest” Páll Þorláksson: “They have not labored industriously by any means, unless bringing 1/2 acre to one acre of land into cultivation in three years can be so considered. In fact many of them have burned their fences, or killed their cows during the last winter, and are now stealing away secretly and adopting every scheme to defraud the very Government, which they profess in the memorial to be so grateful to for supplying them so liberally.”⁶⁰ However, many of the signatories were not among Páll’s followers, and a number had made quite substantial improvements to their lands. Many did leave the colony, but many others remained in New Iceland for the rest of their lives. Some were Taylor’s bitterest enemies, but others were among his closest friends. Kristmundur Benjamínsson publicly thanked Taylor for the help he had given him since arriving in 1875, particularly

⁵⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 250, docket 25759, Taylor to Lowe, 20 May 1879.

⁵⁹ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 247, docket 25445, Petition to the Dominion Government of Canada, March 1879.

⁶⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 250, docket 25759, Taylor to Lowe, 20 May 1879.

in adopting two children that he and his wife did not have the means to care for.⁶¹ Why would someone like Kristmundur, who considered Taylor his friend and benefactor, participate in an effort to reach a “secret deal” with Ottawa?

The petition probably had wide appeal because it was primarily a reasonable assessment of the problems that had plagued the colonization scheme from its inception, and contain a sensible proposal for remedying the situation. The petitioners argued that despite the best of intentions on all sides, the colonization scheme had proved to be a disappointment, and, as a result, the losses should be distributed equally. It was not simply the government that had lost its investment; the settlers had lost substantially as well since their efforts seemed unlikely to produce the desired result of a successful, prosperous colony. It asserted that the colony site had been poorly chosen, not because the land was generally unfit for settlement, but because it was too far from other settlements and prone to flooding. New Iceland could become viable in the future, but only if substantially more capital than the Icelanders possessed was applied to build the roads and ditches necessary to facilitate effective communication and drainage. The central goal of the petition, however, was to revise the terms of the government loan, and thus make it possible for those who wished to leave to settle their accounts in an equitable manner.

The petitioners identified the central problems with immigrant colonization reserves in general, and with the government acting as creditor for the colonists. They knew that their homestead lands were the security for the loan, and therefore reasoned that their improvement of these lands should be taken into account. Even if they had not

⁶¹ *Framfari*, 14 May 1879, p. 569.

obtained legal title, their labour had increased its value, and thus entitled them to some consideration. They suggested that a panel of five consisting of government agents and representatives from the colony council be charged with assessing the value of each settler's improvements. If it was determined that they had done enough to cover the amount of their loan they would be free to leave the reserve with all their moveable property. If it was determined that they had not done enough, they would still be allowed to take all their property with them, but would have to sign a promissory note to repay the balance.⁶² The settlers thus attempted to force a more expansive notion of property rights than that applied by the Canadian government in this context. The government held on to the argument that, regardless of long-term residence or improvements made, the realization of property rights in Dominion Lands awaited the granting of the patent, which in turn depended on the repayment of the loan. This rigid approach was at variance with the way settler claims were administered in many other zones of colonization during this period.⁶³

Many of the settlers believed that they had the right to compensation for improvement on their lands as well as the right to sell them outright, because by accepting their homesteads as security for the loan, they had entered into a form of mortgage contract with the Dominion government. One of the key pillars of mortgage law was the ability of the debtor to redeem their mortgaged property.⁶⁴ John Lowe called the arrangement a "mortgage on improvements" when appearing before the Select

⁶² LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 247, docket 25445, Petition to the Dominion Government of Canada, March 1879.

⁶³ See John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 81-87.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization in February 1878.⁶⁵ But at the same time, he shied away from that position in his instructions to Taylor, “It is perfectly true, as you state, that a mortgage was to be the form of security. But the debt is nevertheless a simple debt, quite apart from any form of security that was to be given for it, and of course if any of them think of going away there is nothing more clear than that you must demand payment.”⁶⁶ The result was the half-measure of the formal acknowledgement. Beginning in May 1877, Sigtryggur Jónasson had required the settlers to sign a document by which the settlers acknowledged and pledged to repay their debt to the government (see figure 7.1). This document stated: “the lands...that we have taken up in the settlement...with all buildings and improvements shall become security to the Dominion Government of Canada until the repayment of that portion of the said loan.”⁶⁷ When it became apparent that some settlers had interpreted this as a mortgage, Sigtryggur refuted the claim, asserting that it had been simply an acknowledgement of the settlers’ responsibility to repay their debts, in keeping with orders he had received from Ottawa.⁶⁸ Whether sanctioned by the agents or not, as the out-migration movement commenced the settlers began to sell their interests in the lands they occupied—essentially squatter’s rights—to other settler for the amount of their outstanding loan. For

⁶⁵ “Report of the Select Standing Committee on Immigration and Colonization,” Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 1878, pp. 20-21.

⁶⁶ LAC, RG 17, A I 6, reel T-134, volume 1633, p. 491, Lowe to Taylor, 28 February 1878.

⁶⁷ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 202, docket 20828, Jónasson to the Minister of Agriculture, 24 September 1877. *Framfari*, 7 January 1879, pp. 433-435.

⁶⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 2, reel T-116, volume 1517, p. 136, Lowe to Taylor, 2 October 1876. *Framfari*, 7 January 1879, p. 434-435.

example, Ólafur Ólafsson sold his homestead Ós for \$260, which was roughly the amount of his indebtedness.⁶⁹

The meaning of the Sigtryggur's acknowledgement created a great deal of confusion. If it was not in fact a legal mortgage, then what was it? The "secret deal letter" asserted that Sigtryggur had meant the acknowledgement to be an indenture contract obliging the immigrants to stay in the reserve until they had paid off their debts. The petitioners noted that "it was not mentioned at all that we were bound to live in the reserve...whether it proved bad or good, though we are told so now."⁷⁰ It is not known whether Taylor or Sigtryggur ever literally told any of the settlers that they were not free to leave the reserve as long as their debt remained on the books. For his part, Sigtryggur vigorously denied having said any such thing; "It was never intended to institute a form of slavery in this colony; it was intended only as a colony of free and honourable men."⁷¹ However, for Taylor, the former slave-master and frequent user of indenture contracts, it is certainly not out of the realm of possibility. However, if he did so he was acting without authority from his superiors in Ottawa. The *Dominion Lands Act* contained no such caveat, and Taylor never received any such directions. He was, however, instructed to collect all debts from departing settlers, including their animals and implements, which "were intended solely to assist in building up that colony."⁷² The nuance separating

⁶⁹ *Framfari*, 23 December 1878, p. 430. Landsbókasafn Íslands [National Library of Iceland], Lbs. 511, fol - Journal A 1875 & 1876. Lbs. 512, fol - Journal B 1876. Lbs. 514 fol - Journal C.

⁷⁰ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 247, docket 25445, Petition to the Dominion Government of Canada, March 1879. Emphasis in the original.

⁷¹ *Framfari*, 17 July 1879, pp. 620-628.

⁷² LAC, RG 17, A I 6, reel T-134, volume 1633, p. 491, Lowe to Taylor, 28 February 1878; LAC, RG 17, A I 2, reel T-117, volume 1522, p. 63, Lowe to Taylor, 15 June 1878.

being forced to remain on the reserve and the requirement to repay one's debts before leaving was lost on the petitioners. Because of their poverty, the latter virtually guaranteed the former. Sigtryggur, as the only Icelandic-speaker connected with the government, became the target of his fellow colonists' dissatisfaction, even though he worked diligently to provide information about the government loan, and kept meticulous records of the accounts.⁷³ In large measure, Sigtryggur was repudiated for faithfully carrying out the instructions he was given by his superiors in Ottawa.

When migration to Dakota began in the spring of 1878, Taylor urged the government to take legal measures against any of the departing settlers attempting to remove livestock and implements from the reserve without first paying their share of the Government Loan.⁷⁴ Following the revelation of the "secret deal letter" a year later, Taylor became increasingly bellicose and openly threatened those who were attempting to leave in the pages of *Framfari*. He asserted that such behaviour was not only illegal but also a stain on the reputation of the Icelandic people.

...such treacherous conduct is both wanting in gratitude and dishonourable, and likely to abase the reputation and honour of the entire Icelandic people, it becomes particularly degrading for the settlers of New Iceland...I therefore publicly declare herewith that all who make themselves guilty of moving out of this colony without my permission any livestock or objects provided by the government loan, or knowingly and maliciously harm or destroy the said animals or objects, will be prosecuted upon the order of the government, and should they be found guilty, will be punished in accordance with the law with the imposition of fines or imprisonment as ordered by the court.⁷⁵

Taylor was appointed a stipendiary magistrate, but at the same time he was discouraged from using his authority to seize property from the settlers. John Lowe told him privately

⁷³ See *Framfari*, 7 January 1879, pp. 434-435 and 17 July 1879, pp. 620-628.

⁷⁴ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 225, docket 23142, Taylor to Lowe, 1 June 1878.

⁷⁵ *Framfari*, 14 May 1879, pp. 565-566.

“it is not certain whether there is any law by which the Icelanders could be prevented from removing away with cattle for which they are indebted to the Government or whether you could be justified in arresting them. It is not therefore, best to try doubtful experiments.”⁷⁶ Edmund Burke Wood, the Chief Justice of Manitoba, also told Taylor that a policy of forced seizure was of questionable legal validity, and was undesirable in any event.⁷⁷ However, Taylor and Sigtryggur had already done so, in seizing an ox from Jakob J. Jónsson and Sveinn Björnsson as they were leaving the reserve.⁷⁸ This act touched off a firestorm of allegations and counter allegations in *Framfari* between Sigtryggur and former Icelandic parliamentarian Björn Pjetursson, who owned a partial share in the disputed ox and still resided in the reserve. He was incensed that the ox had not been at least returned to him and claimed that Sigtryggur and Taylor were acting in an unfair and arbitrary manner. “At home in old Iceland I was familiar with the circumstances of loans and acquainted with people who had borrowed from the National Treasury, public institutions and private individuals, but I have never encountered anything resembling this situation.”⁷⁹ Björn challenged the agents to reveal which laws of the country supported their actions.

The protracted and bitter debate between Björn and Sigtryggur was not simply over “a single, wretched half-worn out ox” as Halldór Briem, the editor of *Framfari* put it in retrospect.⁸⁰ It recapitulated all the problems and ambiguities that had arisen from linking government aid for the colonization scheme to the transfer of landed property

⁷⁶ LAC, RG 17, A I 6, reel T-134, volume 1635, p. 80, Lowe to Taylor, 26 May 1879.

⁷⁷ LAC, John Lowe fonds, MG 29, E18, volume 19, Taylor to Lowe, 9 June 1879.

⁷⁸ *Framfari*, 23 April 1879, p. 542.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Framfari*, 2 September 1879, pp. 661-662.

rights in the reserve. The repayment of the Government Loan was cast as both a legal and a moral question, which had consequences for the future of the Icelanders in Canada. Halldór Briem opined, “The Dominion Government and even Lord Dufferin have been reproved for having done so much for the Icelanders and extending to them so large a loan, on the grounds that Icelanders are not and never will become useful members of the national society. Is it proper to let experience prove the words of such men?”⁸¹ Björn Pjetursson thought that the issue came down to one central question: “Is it dishonourable or unmanly to move out of the colony before first repaying one’s share of the government loan, or has the government loan diminished people’s personal liberty?”⁸² Björn, probably one of the writers of the “secret deal letter”, reinforced the point that the settlement of New Iceland had been a speculation based on the best intentions of all parties, but which for a variety of reasons had not lived up to everyone’s expectations. The losses for the speculation should thus be equally divided among all parties, not simply placed on the Icelanders to be repaid no matter what the consequences. “The Canadian Government undoubtedly...intended the recipients [of the loan] to settle here and cultivate the land, but it never occurred to the government, I dare say, to establish the Icelanders (as beneficiaries of the loan) as a kind of serfs on the land...”⁸³ Accusations and recriminations continued to fly back and forth between the two protagonists, but ultimately Björn gave up the fight and departed New Iceland for Dakota. Over the next few years, as the situation was finally resolved, Taylor and Sigtryggur came to share a position that was not radically different from those they had fought so hard against.

⁸¹ Ibid., 14 June 1878, pp. 266-267.

⁸² Ibid., 29 March 1879, pp. 526-528.

⁸³ Ibid.

The first land patents were not issued for the Icelandic Reserve until 1884, nine years after the founding of the settlement.⁸⁴ By that time, most of the original settlers were gone, including John Taylor and his extended family. Widespread flooding in late 1879 and 1880 convinced even those who were deeply committed to New Iceland to give up and go elsewhere. “The Loyalists” as they were sometimes called, chose not to join their countrymen in Dakota Territory, but instead founded a new settlement in the Tiger Hills region of southwestern Manitoba. Even though they had moved and taken up new homesteads, these settlers continued to petition the government through John Taylor to obtain the patents for their New Iceland farms. Both these settlers and those still in the reserve recognized their obligation to pay back the Government Loan, but asserted that according to the general terms of the Dominion Lands Act, their real possession of the land and years of labour entitled them to their patents regardless of their indebtedness. If they received their patents, payment of the loan would follow.⁸⁵

To resolve the situation, the Department of the Interior sent a Lands Agent, George Newcomb, to the Icelandic Reserve in the summer of 1883. The Department of Agriculture asked Newcomb to collect on debts at the same time as recording entries or granting patents to land.⁸⁶ Newcomb initially encountered resistance from the settlers, who were concerned about being held responsible for the loan accounts of people who had abandoned the reserve. Newcomb told them that he considered the question of

⁸⁴ LAC, Department of the Interior fonds, RG 15 [hereafter RG 15], Dominion Lands Branch series [hereafter D II 1], reel T-13824, volume 572, file 174672, List of Patents issued in the Icelandic Reserve, 1888.

⁸⁵ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 366, docket 39363, Friðjón Friðriksson, Jóhann Briem, and Þorgrímur Jónsson to Taylor, 15 March 1883 and volume 395 docket 42612, Taylor to Lowe, 25 January 1884.

⁸⁶ LAC, RG 17, A I 2, reel T-119, volume 1542, p. 54, Lowe to Newcomb, 30 August 1883.

indebtedness to be entirely separate from the question of patents, and as a result the settlers acceded to having their homesteads entered. On the probability of the loan being repaid, he stated that the original settlers were still too poor to pay back their loan, but that they were assisting newcomers from Iceland who would otherwise need government assistance to survive. In this way, he believed that the Icelanders were repaying their debt to the Canadian government.⁸⁷ After Newcomb's report, officials in the Department of Agriculture made some half-hearted efforts to get the Icelanders to repay their loan. In failing health and considered redundant by his superiors in Ottawa, seventy-year old John Taylor's purpose as Icelandic Agent was redefined as a "commission on the collection of the Icelandic arrearages."⁸⁸ However, in reality the Government had realized that the loan was "for the most part bad" and would likely not be collected.⁸⁹ This proved to be largely true, as virtually none of the loan was ever repaid.⁹⁰

* * *

The path to becoming "freemen serving no overlord, and being no man's men but your own; each master of his own farm" as Lord Dufferin had put it in 1877, was a difficult and winding one for New Iceland's settlers. For most of those who listened to Dufferin that day, the goal would not be realized in the Icelandic reserve, if it at all. For some the physical and mental challenge was simply too much, the setbacks too many.

⁸⁷ LAC, RG 17, A I 1, volume 382, docket 41183, George Newcomb to Lowe, 15 September 1883; Canada, *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1884, No. 12, The Icelandic Reserve - Report of George Newcomb, Dominion Lands Agent, 8 December 1883.

⁸⁸ LAC, RG 17, A I 6, volume 1640, reel T-138, p. 983, Lowe to Taylor, 20 November 1883.

⁸⁹ LAC, Department of Finance fonds, RG 19, E 2 e, volume 299 file 22, Lowe to Courtney, 10 January 1883.

⁹⁰ Magnússon, "Landnám Íslendinga í Nýja Íslandi," 33.

Others worked faithfully toward that goal for years, but even for them it remained elusive for years after their arrival in the colony. The colonists were generally thankful for the support that the government had extended to them to get them established, but were not prepared to have that support stand as a barrier both keeping them in the reserve and delaying their achievement of the status of property holders. They successfully turned the debt caveat in the 1874 Dominion Lands Act inside out by demanding that patents be issued before repayment of the loan was considered. They thus turned an effective indenture restricting their freedom into a negotiated mortgage that facilitated their attainment of rights and privileges of liberal citizenship in Canada. Even in the unlikely place of Gimli, and in the unlikely context of a feud over “a single, wretched half worn out ox,” the liberal order in the Canadian Northwest was being contested.

**Conclusion:
New Iceland and Liberal Colonization**

Between 1875 and 1897 lands along the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg were reserved for an experiment in colonization by the Canadian government. The initial goal of policy makers in Ottawa was to establish a self-sufficient community of Icelandic migrants who, they hoped, would attract further Icelandic immigration to the Northwest. The Icelandic reserve was one of several such projects launched by both Liberal and Conservative administrations in Manitoba and the North-West Territories during the 1870s and 1880s. Some of these involved continental European migrants, such as the Mennonites, while others were designed to attract settlers from Britain and Ireland or French Canadians from Quebec or New England. The goal of this policy was to rapidly augment the non-Aboriginal population of the Northwest with people who would help transform Aboriginal territory into a settler-dominated agricultural empire. Indian and Half-breed reserves were created at the same time and bordered on settler reserves. Together they were part of a broader patchwork of reserved spaces, that also included railway and Hudson's Bay Company reserves, and areas "open" for homesteading that were in effect reserved for Anglo-Canadian, British, and American migrants. It has been a central contention of this study that the establishment and administration of these different types of reserved spaces must be interpreted as a relational process. In the Canadian Northwest, Aboriginal dispossession and the building of settler communities were fundamentally intertwined. Distinctions among between different categories of people within the colonial population were related to new regimes of spatial organization. The experience of a specific group of migrants such as the Icelanders cannot be

understood without reference to the wider socio-economic and cultural frameworks into which they fit.

The Canadian state's recruitment of Icelandic migrants reflected ambitions and ideologies that were at the heart of its colonization efforts in northwestern North America. Nineteenth century science and European romanticism stressed the racial and historical connections between Icelanders and Anglo-Saxons. Icelanders were counted among the "hardy northern races" that imperial dreamers such as Richard Burton, Alexander Morris and Robert Chandler Haliburton believed were ideally suited to building a great empire in the northern half of the North American continent. This belief, combined with the powerful endorsement of Governor-General Lord Dufferin, resulted in Canadian immigrant officials classing the Icelanders as "desirable settlers" during the early 1870s. Almost continuously from 1875 until the First World War, special emigration agents armed with propaganda and offers of subsidies for transportation and resettlement travelled throughout Iceland espousing the promise of a better life in Canada. Canadian officials were seeking to facilitate and direct a movement that had developed independently of their efforts. Mass emigration from Iceland was spurred primarily by the poor economic prospects that faced young people in the mid to late nineteenth century, by the increasing availability of information about overseas destinations, and by developing linkages of transportation and trade within the Atlantic economy. The involvement of the Canadian state and its corporate proxies—most notably the Scottish-Canadian Allan Steamship Line—was important in directing upwards of 80 per cent of the more than 15,000 Icelandic emigrants in the period 1870 to 1914 to Canada. In spite of its many difficulties, New Iceland ultimately did become an

important locus of Icelandic settlement that spawned other settlements elsewhere in the Canadian and American wests.

The legal and institutional framework that undergirded the colonization of the Canadian Northwest during this period was derived from the principles of nineteenth century liberalism. Group reserves for immigrant settlers such as New Iceland were integral to the process of colonial state formation and to spreading liberal ideas and practices in the region. While the political economists and social scientists of the early twentieth century who studied the “problem” of ethno-religious group settlement would have certainly agreed with the former statement, they certainly would have disputed the latter. W.A. Mackintosh and Carl Dawson considered group settlements to be aberrations from the “normal” pattern of settlement, in which a pioneering individual—implicitly white, Anglophone and male—broke away from the herd to chart a new course in the west. As subsequent research into both English-speaking and continental European settler enclaves has revealed, this normal pattern was possibly quite rare. Historians of settler communities have charted broadly similar patterns of behaviour that seem to transcend ethnic boundaries, including chain migration and the desire to transfer wealth from one generation to another.¹

Group settlements were not inherently either conservative or liberal in orientation. In many cases, settlers charted a middle course between replicating old patterns, and adapting to the new liberal conceptions of community. Such was the case with the New Icelanders. While they wanted to live in a rural community with other Icelanders, especially kin and neighbours from the same districts in Iceland, in going to the Icelandic

¹ See Gérard Bouchard, "Family Reproduction in New Rural Areas: Outline of a North American Model," *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (1994): 475-510.

reserve they were not seeking geographic, economic, political, or cultural isolation from the wider settler society. The closeness of the reserve to the projected line of the Canadian Pacific Railway was one of the main reasons why the Icelandic deputation chose the site on Lake Winnipeg. The main motivation of the young families who made up the bulk of the first settlers was to better their material circumstances. Many colonists initially believed that because of its abundant natural resources and central location, New Iceland offered this possibility, not only for themselves, but also for friends and relatives still in Iceland who planned to emigrate. When this possibility receded, New Iceland's colonists looked elsewhere to achieve their purpose.

Colonization reserves facilitated liberal transformation in the Canadian Northwest in three main ways. First, they were a method for the Canadian state to assert its sovereign authority over the Northwest. This was done according to legal and administrative mechanisms that blended older methods of colonization with more recent liberal theories and practices. The Orders-in-Council that created these reserves were in essence compacts between the state and individual and corporate settlement promoters, including ethno-religious communities, in which the latter were given exclusive rights to colonize specified territories. In this sense, they were distant cousins of the proprietary grants of the early European colonization of North America in the seventeenth century, in which rights to conquer, control, and administer large tracts were meted out to various aristocratic grantees. However, the colonization reserves of the 1870s and 1880s were more closely related to the ideas and practices of systematic colonization developed by British and American liberal thinkers during the mid nineteenth century. In these schemes, private initiative was constrained within a legal and administrative framework

established by the centralized colonial state. In large measure, lands in western Canadian colonization reserves were sub-divided and granted to individuals according to procedures laid out in the Dominion Lands Act. While provision for one alternative system of land holding, the Mennonite villages, was inserted into the act in 1876, in most colonization reserves, including New Iceland, the general provisions of the act were applied. Under the Dominion Lands system, individualized, freehold land tenure organized through the system of 160-acre homesteads, was the norm.

This new order had to be superimposed over existing patterns of Aboriginal settlement and resource use. The sub-division of the south basin of Lake Winnipeg into Aboriginal and settler spaces occurred in the context of the 1876-77 smallpox epidemic. In that crisis the new regime of reserves and systematic survey dovetailed with the imperatives of public health. Although the disease caused general devastation to both the indigenous and settler populations, the Ojibwa, Cree, and Métis population suffered greater mortality than did the Icelanders. With many of their members dead, the collective land claims of the Sandy Bar, Big Island, and Norway House bands to the Icelandic reserve were muted. At the same time, the physical vestiges of their presence were erased in the name of sanitation. While this dramatic episode was only the beginning of contact and interaction between Icelanders and Aboriginal people in the region it had far reaching consequences. Several of the survivors remained in the region, and a few continued to press their claims to lands in the Icelandic reserve. However, the epidemic and the administrative response it elicited irrevocably altered the human geography of the region and solidified the segregation of different components of the colonial population into different types of official or unofficial reserves. The status of the

various reserves within the Dominion Lands system mirrored their residents' status as citizens, non-citizens, or quasi-citizens of the Canadian colonial state.

The second way in which colonization reserves facilitated liberal transformation was by creating discreet territorial units where projects of social engineering could be carried out. Part of the reason that colonization promoters such as Gilbert Malcolm Sproat advocated "farm colonies" was that they would encourage the development of an orderly settler population. Compact settlement colonies were presented as an alternative to the rough-and-tumble homosocial cultures and patterns of mixed-race sociability and intimacy that predominated in many corners of the British Empire. Sproat and others whom shared his vision aimed to create nodes of agricultural settlement in which the proper order of race, gender, and class predominated.²

For those who Canadian officials considered unprepared to exercise the full rights and privileges of liberal citizenship, reserves could be used as social laboratories to civilize and assimilate. In the hierarchy of race and culture that predominated in the Canadian Northwest during the late nineteenth century, unnaturalized immigrant aliens such as the Icelanders occupied an intermediate position between white English-speaking British subjects at the top and unenfranchised Indians at the bottom. While the Icelanders were generally considered to be racially and culturally well-suited to the task of colonizing the Northwest, they were simultaneously considered to be a somewhat backward people in need of tutelage. Many contemporary North Americans believed that the Icelanders represented a fragment of medieval culture; their supposed long isolation

² Library and Archives Canada, Department of Agriculture fonds, RG 17, "Immigration Branch" series, A-III-2, volume 2397, G.M. Sproat to J.H. Pope, Letters 'A' 'B' and 'C', 27 March & 1 April 1872.

from the mainstream of European culture had left them sadly behind in the march of history. Icelandic Agent John Taylor thought it was his God-given mission to help the Icelanders by fostering the spirit of liberal progress among them. Taylor and his superiors administered the reserve as a tutelary space, where the Icelanders would be trained to exercise the full rights and privileges of British subjects. Both critics and proponents of the Icelandic reserve frequently expressed their admiration for the widespread literacy and emphasis on education that they observed amongst the colonists. However, apostles of liberalism who sought to shape the colony, such as Minister of the Interior David Mills, do not seem to have fully appreciated the degree to which the Icelanders were already deeply engaged with liberal ideas and practices. In contrast to the ways in which Canadian parliamentarians depicted them in the debate over the Keewatin Municipalities Act, many of New Iceland's colonists were hardly neophytes in the principles of liberal order; they came from a society that was itself in the process of redefining its economic, social, political, and cultural relationships in dialogue with notions of liberal freedom. The fact that the Icelanders readily adopted the Dominion Lands system, and instituted a municipal government structure with broad affinities to Canadian practices, reflected this reality. By contrast, the Dominion government's failure to create the conditions necessary for private property relations—by completing the survey and instituting a formal system for registering land titles—was a source of continual frustration to the colonists.

As conditions in the reserve deteriorated due to bad weather, crop failures, and flooding, the distance between the hopeful rhetoric of Lord Dufferin and the reality of their situation became increasingly apparent to many. While they were encouraged to

become owners of property enjoying the full rights of liberal citizenship, and were invited to become one people with the Anglo-Canadians, real progress remained elusive.

Although many colonists worked diligently to convert their land claims into productive farms, both through the conventional work of homesteading and through wage-labour on and off the reserve, their indebtedness to the government seemed to lock them into a form of indentured apprenticeship on their reserve. Fundamental disagreements developed over whether progress was possible in their location, and a debate over whether the reserve had helped or hindered them raged in the pages of *Framfari*. Favorable reports of a few Icelandic pioneers in the Dakota Territory, and catastrophic flooding in the early 1880s, led most of the original colonists to give up on New Iceland. Nonetheless, some persevered and were joined by later waves of migrants from Iceland both prior to and after the colony's reserve status was rescinded in 1897.

The case of the Icelandic reserve reveals how the process of liberal transformation in the Canadian Northwest was not simply a matter of the top-down exercise of state power or of the pioneer initiative of enterprising colonists. It was rather a dialectical process between the centre and periphery, between government officials and people who were the objects of state power. The Icelandic colonists played a crucial role in extending the ideas and practices of liberal rule over a new terrain. They did so because they believed it would help their community achieve material progress, and because they wanted to escape the limitations on their civil and political rights that their status as unnaturalized immigrants in a colonization reserve placed upon them. In the process, they drew a sharp distinction between themselves, as members of a civilized community, and their Aboriginal neighbours in ways intended to bolster their claims to racial

whiteness. As they challenged their exclusion from the promises of liberal order, the Icelanders helped extend its concepts and practices over a new terrain and worked to integrate themselves into the developing white settler society of the Canadian Northwest.

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