

Inland Ocean: Navigating Sense of Place in a Colonial State

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I identify as a rhetoric and communications scholar who focuses on narrative. Based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the area bounded by Treaty 1, I do not identify myself as belonging to a specific cultural group other than being a legal “Canadian.” This lack of cultural identification has provided me with immense freedom, leading me ultimately to study the language and literature of a country on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Iceland, and as a result my interest has returned to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, to the heart of Treaty 1 territory. By travelling far away, I found myself returning home. After travelling over an ocean, I find myself back in the middle of a continent.

Throughout my PhD studies I was often asked a single question by people I would meet in the streets of Reykjavik: “Why Iceland?” I was asked this question time and time again. Iceland is a small island nation, thousands of kilometers from either North America or Europe. The interest and enthusiasm held by foreigners for Iceland and its literature was a curious phenomenon for the locals, or at least that was always my understanding of why the question was asked, again and again. For me the answer seemed

clear, and I stated it as such: “Why not?” Iceland has a unique literary history, not only for a society of its size, but in a global context. The medieval sagas are well known, emerging in the late-12th century, flourishing into the 15th century. The most famous sagas are those about early Icelanders, historiographical texts that narrate stories of the earliest settlers from the 9th and 10th centuries, their families and their feuds, the conversion of Iceland from paganism to Christianity c. 1000 CE, the settlement of Greenland about the same time, and the ensuing encounters of Norse explorers with Indigenous peoples of the North American east coast (see, e.g., *Eirik the Red’s Saga* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*). These texts are immensely valuable to world literature. What drew me in even more than the sagas are the lesser-known Eddas, though their influence has perhaps been even greater. Most of what we know of the pre-Christian belief system of the Norse peoples is housed within the two Eddas, *The Poetic Edda* and *The Prose Edda*. These texts contain myths about the gods and goddesses and their encounters with giants and giantesses and other paranormal beings, and they also contain many legends about Northern Europe’s pre-historic heroes and heroines. Why, then, was it difficult for so many Icelanders to understand why people from all over the world flock to Iceland to learn their language and study their literature?

I might be able to locate an answer within my own experience in Manitoba. I completed my undergraduate degree in English Literature and History at the University of Manitoba in 2006 and was completely uninterested in almost everything that had to do with Manitoba, including its history and literary traditions. For me at that time Manitoba was an inland ocean that left me feeling isolated, separated by long distances from the cosmopolitan urban centres of Canada and the United States. I imagined there would be little interest for outsiders to travel to Manitoba to study its peoples, its history, its literature, or anything else. At that point in my life I sought a way out of my home, so I could not have imagined why someone would want to come here. I wanted to fly away to another country, to somewhere exciting.

So I moved abroad to study the language and literature of Denmark and then Iceland. During these years away from Canada I realized that a place and its traditions that I found fascinating might not fascinate the locals, the people who had been immersed in the local culture for their entire lives. I became estranged from my own home province over the period of a decade, yet each time I returned I found it harder to leave, sadly shuffling off to the airport after a two-week visit. Sometime near the end of my time abroad, I realized that my interest in Icelandic language and literature is, among other things, an interest in my home province, Manitoba. By living in Iceland, studying its language and literature, I had unlocked a previously inaccessible part of Manitoba's history and culture. I had discovered something that I found interesting in my home province, Icelandic culture in Manitoba, and the more I looked into it, the more I found. By hearing the question "Why Iceland?" over and over again, I realized that I had spent my life wondering "Why Manitoba?" The answer had always been there: where there are people there is the need to study the humanities, our stories in particular.

Icelandic immigrants arrived in Manitoba in 1875, and for several years afterward they continued to arrive in great numbers, settling in Winnipeg, in the Interlake region between Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba, and in several other townships scattered across the southern section of the province (see, e.g., Eyford; Brydon; Wheeler). These settlements, I now realize, are products of the much larger emigration from many parts of Europe, other parts of Canada, and the United States that took place throughout the 19th century. Suddenly, as I approached the end of my years abroad, I knew that my studies in Iceland had introduced me to the study of a rich tradition of immigrant literature in Manitoba, the complicated and difficult subject of colonization in North America, pluralism in 20th- and 21st-century Canadian society, and much more.

My research into Icelandic language and literature has advanced further, leading me to interrogate the use of medieval texts for modern reconstructions. The sagas and Eddas which readers and writers revere

as literary, historical, and rhetorical gemstones also hold deeply personal meanings for those who are drawn to them for spiritual reasons. I always approach these sources as literary texts or rhetorical artifacts grounded in their compositional contexts, the extant narratives representing stories that were amplified by oral tradition and the imaginations of generations of storytellers, scribes, and audiences (see McGillivray 2018 and 2020). When approaching these sources with this literary-rhetorical perspective it is possible to carefully yet cautiously reconstruct some historical context, to analyze narrative, and to compare sources, both closely related ones and more distantly related ones. These scholarly methods are thought out, reflexively applied, and updated by contemporary scholarship (see, e.g., Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson). This approach to the sources is not the only possible one, as there is a growing community of neo-pagans who identify as Heathens, a movement that is largely decentralized and heterogeneous. For Heathens, the sagas and the Eddas are more than literary, historical, and rhetorical sources. These medieval Icelandic texts are religious texts.

Heathenism in the twenty-first century is a new area of research for me, and in pursuing it I am joining several scholars who have published important work on it already, though only a few, and none in Canada (see, e.g., Snook; von Schnurbein). Moreover, this extends my work geographically, moving outward from Iceland and Manitoba, for Heathenism is a global phenomenon, and religion is universally relevant, if not universally adhered to or believed. What interests me the most are the divergent interpretations that are brought to bear upon the same set of sources and their multifarious rhetorical applications.

What has developed is a pathway in my research in which I am engaged in a dialogue between the medieval and the modern, the local and the global, and the secular and the spiritual. In order to work within these subjects a huge grasp of historical context is required, and an ever-increasing respect for language. For medieval studies in Iceland, a researcher must take the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions into account, in

addition to the pre-Christian religions of the North. For heritage studies in Manitoba, a researcher must consider immigration and colonization in Canada and current social contexts. For the study of a New Religious Movement such as Heathenism, a researcher must carefully study many aspects and trends in societies in which members are found, including radicalization, politics, and the relationship between scholarship and belief. I discovered these threads in my research program ultimately because of a series of coincidences, including becoming bored at home and then seeking out the world, meeting influential teachers at certain moments, and making life-changing decisions. As a researcher, I aim to share information that is relevant to my readership, and importantly, as a teacher, I aim to assist my students in finding one of their own threads, or perhaps helping them to draw threads together.

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