

# Valhalla in Manitoba: An Icelandic Department Trip to New Iceland

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Figure 1: The White Rock Monument on Willow Island, commemorating the 1875 arrival of Icelandic immigrants to Manitoba (Photograph by Coleman Geeraert, 2023).

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This trip to New Iceland was organized as part of ICEL 3320: Old Norse Mythology by instructor Dustin Geeraert, with indispensable support from Icelandic Department Secretary Catari M. Gauthier and Department Head P.J. Buchan. Katrín Níelsdóttir of the Icelandic Collection and Ryan E. Johnson of the Icelandic Department and the University of Iceland, and Stefan Jonasson, editor of the Icelandic-Canadian newspaper Lögberg-Heimskringla, attended the event and helped guide students and guests around the various sites. The group was welcomed to the New Iceland Heritage Museum by Julianna Roberts, and guided through the museum and Viking Park by Elva Simundsson. Thanks to Coleman Geeraert for photography and video. Finally, thanks to Exclusive Bus Lines and to Gimli's Europa Restaurant, which rapidly fed our hungry group.



Figure 2: Left) Einar Jonsson's statue of Icelandic advocate for self-rule Jón Sigurðsson on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly (Photograph from Icelandic Canadian Frón, 2022). Right) The same statue is now flanked by new pine trees; this angle also shows Einar Jonsson's work The Pioneer in the base supporting the statue; see Icelandic Connection 72.2, 54. (Photograph by Coleman Geeraert, 2023).

After a recent tunneling project required uprooting large old pine trees, new pine trees are now growing near the statue of Icelandic advocate for self-rule Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879), the oldest statue remaining on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislative Building in downtown Winnipeg. This statue, created by Icelandic sculptor Einar Jonsson (1874-1954), “was cast in 1921 from an identical statue in Reykjavík, Iceland and erected by the Icelandic community of Manitoba” (The Manitoba Historical Society). After an early morning pickup at Elizabeth Dafoe Library, our day on September 21 began here.



Figure 3: Left) Jakob Sigurðsson's illustration of Valhalla from the famous Melsteðs-Edda, which travelled from Iceland to Manitoba and back ([MyNDIR](#)). Right) Map of New Iceland from the [New Iceland Heritage Museum](#) (Photograph by Coleman Geeraert,

In the Old Norse Mythology of medieval Icelandic books like *The Prose Edda* and *The Poetic Edda*, Valhalla is the heavenly hall which houses heroes who died in battle, the Einherjar. Located in the divine citadel of Asgard, where many generations of heroes feast, hosted by the god of war and poetry, Odin, and the goddess of love and witchcraft, Freyja. They battle to the death daily and are resurrected immediately, thus perpetually honing their arts of war until the world itself ends at Ragnarok.



Figure 4: Left) Members of the trip at the Viking Statue in Gimli (Photograph by Coleman Geeraert, 2023). Right) Photographer Coleman Geeraert in a more accurate Viking helmet (Photograph by the author, 2023).

The idea of “Valhalla in Manitoba” was to consider what role the myths and legends of Iceland’s medieval literature may have played in the culture of the Icelandic immigrants who settled in New Iceland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose difficult arrival on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in 1875 is commemorated by the White Rock monument on Willow Island.



Figure 3: Left) A buried time capsule is marked by stones placed in the shape of a ship in the waterfront Viking Park in Gimli (Photograph by Coleman Geeraert, 2023). Right) Blue algae on Valhalla Beach, just north of Gimli (Photograph by Coleman Geeraert, 2023).

To guide our journey, we enlisted the help of three experts in Manitoba’s Icelandic-Canadian history. Our first keynote speaker was the editor of the Lögberg-Heimskringla, Stefan Jonasson, who spoke about “Placenames, Publications, and Poets drawing on Old Norse Mythology in the Canadian West” at the New Iceland Heritage Museum’s Lady of the Lake Theatre. Stefan focused on New Iceland, the Rural Municipalities of Gimli and Riverton-Bifrost.



Figure 4: The Norse gods Thor and Odin above the town of Gimli, as depicted on one of the murals on the Wharf in Gimli (Photograph by the author, 2014).

In the case of Gimli, the name was suggested even before the town site had been chosen. In *The Poetic Edda*, *The Seeress's Prophecy* describes Gimli as a place in the reborn world after Ragnarok:

A hall she sees standing, fairer than the sun,  
thatched with gold, at Gimle;  
there the noble lords will live  
and spend their days in pleasure.



Figure 5: Left) Baldur's Brow (*Tripleurospermum Perforatum*), a type of Mayweed found in Asia, Europe, and North America (Photograph: *Tripleurospermum Perforatum* near the marina in Bo'ness, Scotland, by Thomas Skyt, [Wikimedia Commons](#), 2010). Right) The town of Baldur around the year 1900 (Photograph from Tom Mitchell's [Prairie Town](#), [Brandon University Archives](#), 2018).

At another Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, Baldur, it was the local flora—the prevalence of the bright flower known as Baldr's brow—that inspired the town's mythical name. Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* explains:

Odin's second son is Baldr, and there is much good to tell about him. He is the best, and all praise him. He is so beautiful and so bright that light shines from him. One plant is so white that it is likened to Baldr's brow. It is the whitest of all plants, and from this you can judge the beauty of both his hair and his body. He is the wisest of the gods. He is also the most beautifully spoken and the most merciful, but one of his characteristics is that none of his decisions is effective. He lives at the place called Bredablik [Gleaming Far and Wide]. It is in heaven, and no impurity may be there.

Stefan noted that while Icelandic-Canadian literature has focused more on inspirations such as nature, history, and the Icelandic Sagas, rather than Norse myth and legend, never the less Icelandic-Canadians published journals called *Freyja*, *Freyr*, and *Baldur*,

and in Alberta, Icelandic-Canadian poet Stephan G. Stephansson included intriguing references to legendary Norse heroes in his poetry. Stefan distinguished between names chosen by Icelandic settlers and those more recently chosen by land developers, in addition to considering names from Norse Myth that we might have expected to be used in Manitoba, such as “home of the wind,” which are absent. Indeed, while Bifrost, the rainbow bridge to the realm of the gods, Asgard, is the placename of a historical municipality in Manitoba, the name Asgard itself is absent. Stefan concluded by noting that Icelandic-Canadian writers are once again drawing inspiration from the myths.



Figure 6: Left) After Baldr’s death he is held captive by Hel, goddess of the underworld. Hermóðr rides Sleipnir to rescue him in the Melsteðs-Edda ([MYNDIR](#)). Right) Rainbow over the prairie (Photo by the author, 2016).

Our second keynote speaker was University of Winnipeg History Professor Ryan Eyford, author of *White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West (2016)*, who spoke about “Norse Mythology and Icelandic Immigration.” Ryan noted that Canadian officials connected their own ideas about Scandinavian culture, often drawing on Norse Myth and its heroic concept of Valhalla, to the Icelanders migrating to Canada to settle New Iceland. Some officials were well-acquainted with Icelandic culture, but others held confused notions. The settlers did indeed bring books with them, and maintained a high degree of literacy, writing and publication even during difficult times of poverty, illness and tragedy. Among those books were of course the famous Melsted Edda, named after the New Iceland farm Melsted. This eighteenth century Icelandic book of Old Norse Mythology contains illustrations drawn by Icelandic farmer, poet and scribe Jakob Sigurðsson (1727-1779). Ryan noted that at the [Ární Magnússon Institute](#), where it is catalogued as SÁM 66 4to, the Melsted Edda is known as “The last manuscript home.” As [My Norse Digital Image Repository \(MYNDIR\)](#) explains:

The last page of the manuscript lists three names which likely represent the earliest owners of SÁM 66: Gísli Gíslason (1797-1758) from Skörð in Reykjahverfi; St. Petersen, who has not been identified; and Magnús Guðmundsson, a farmer at Sandur in Aðaldalur. Magnús’ daughter, Elín Sigríður emigrated to Canada in 1876 and took the manuscript with her. Elín Sigríður’s farm near Gimli, Manitoba was called Melsted, which also became the family’s surname in Canada. The Icelandic consul to Minnesota, Örn Arnar, bought the manuscript from one of Elín Sigríður’s descendants, Ken Melsted in Wynyard, Saskatchewan, and donated it to the Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland on February 2, 2000.

Our final keynote speaker was Manitoba historian Nelson Gerrard, author of *Icelandic River Saga: History of Riverton, Manitoba and District* (1985) and 2023 recipient of the Lieutenant Governor’s Award. At the historic Icelandic-Canadian house, Engimýri, in Riverton, Nelson spoke about “The Invisible Landscape of Local History in Riverton (Rural Municipality of Riverton-Bifrost), Manitoba.” The restored historic house was an ideal setting for our last talk of the day, full of well-preserved furniture, tools, books, and artwork that gave a strong impression of what daily life may have been like for the house’s original occupants. Nelson’s talk focused on local history, genealogy and place-names. He discussed how the Icelandic settlers named their farms, for example: some were named after people, some were farm names transplanted from Iceland, some



Figure 7: The historic Icelandic-Canadian house Engimýri in Riverton, Manitoba (Photograph by Coleman Geeraert, 2023).

were named after landscape features, some were named after particular incidents, a few were satirical, and a few were mythical. Foremost among these is the historic local graveyard, a burial site for those who died during the smallpox outbreak of 1876, called Nástrandir, Corpse Strands.

This graveyard stands on the farmland right next to Engimýri, land that Nelson Gerrard has now been farming for 11 years. Nelson recalled seeing shifting ground conditions which revealed the remains of coffins and human bones and calling in archaeologists to help investigate and document the graves. He had on hand a nineteenth-century Icelandic copy of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, and a nineteenth-century English translation as well, which he quoted to explain the mythical Nástrandir that this graveyard is named after:

What will be after heaven and earth and the whole world are burned? All the gods will be dead, together with the Einherjar [Heroes of Valhalla] and the whole of mankind. Didn't you say earlier that each person will live in some world throughout all ages?

'There will be, at that time, many good places to live. So also there will be many evil ones. It is best to be in Gimle in heaven. For those who take pleasure in good drink, plenty will be found in the hall called Brimir. It stands at the place Okolnir [Never Cold]. There is likewise a splendid hall standing on Nidafjoll [Dark Mountains]. It is made of red gold and is called Sindri [Sparkling]. In this hall, good and virtuous men will live. On Nastrandir [Corpse Strands] there is a large, foul hall whose doors look to the north. It is constructed from the spines of snakes like a house with walls woven from branches. The heads of all the snakes turn into the house, spitting venom so that a river of poison runs through the hall, and down it must wade those who are oath breakers and murderers.

This gruesome description brings to mind the "bog people" of northern Europe, who seem to have been executed or sacrificed as punishment for a terrible crime (oath-breaking or murder might qualify). Nelson related a historical story about this graveyard and a settler who failed to respect this resting-place of the dead. Coinciding with themes explored by both earlier keynotes, Nelson considered the fascinating, eerie experience of seeing the past, for those who may know what is there to be seen, as well as the responsibility of preserving it, and the importance of a mythology for both

individuals and groups. As Nelson explained, for Icelandic-Canadians the difficulties their ancestors faced during the migration and early settlement, the beliefs that united them and the schisms that divided them, as well as their many accomplishments as they pursued new lives while maintaining links to their old country, have themselves reached a kind of legendary or mythological status. In humanity's endless search for survival, success, immortality, and living connections to departed ancestors, many forms of Valhalla can be found.

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