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Anne Brydon

Wilfrid Laurier University, [abrydon@wlu.ca](mailto:abrydon@wlu.ca)

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# RETURNING TO THE PRESENT: ICELANDIC IDENTITY AND THE FESTIVAL

by Anne Brydon

*Department of Anthropology  
McGill University, Montréal, Québec*

## I.

In this paper I wish to express some general thoughts about our always uneasy relationship to the past, and the role that public festivals play in our attempts to reflect upon and represent an understanding of ourselves. The annual *Islendingadagurinn* provides a most interesting occasion for such a discussion, since it contains within its three days of fun and celebration an image of the West Icelandic community and its relationship to Canadian society.

Sorting out who we are is an integral part of human life, and ethnicity — the feeling of belonging to a group sharing common biology, language and history — is just one example of how people define their group in relationship to others. And it is through our myths — the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves — that we are able to think about our identity. When I say 'myth,' I do not mean that such stories are thus fictional, mere fables to be told to children. Rather, myths are powerful and persuasive narratives which we use to organize and interpret our life experience, and to make at least partial sense of our existence.

Since World War II, we have seen the rise of ethnicities and nationalisms worldwide. These traditional loyalties often appear out of place in a world of multinational corporations and mass communications. Yet one characteristic of this so-called 'new ethnicity' is how history is used to define a people: who they are, where they come from, and why they are the way they are. In this way, what can appear to us as a

backward clinging to outmoded traditions is actually a creative use of historical myths to unify a group in the face of present challenges.

This is the case for older ethnic groups in North America, descendants of the massive waves of settlers which flooded the continent at the turn of the century. Separated from their homes and families, these people were caught up in the delicate task of creating a new identity they hoped would preserve their sense of a unique past while remaining relevant to the lives of their descendants.

Since we live in a time of rapid change, it is not surprising that we wish to regain or retain a sense of our past. We build museums and restore old villages, mark historic sites, and buy magazines specializing in some form of nostalgia. Collecting any and every possible object — from baseball cards and pop bottles, to folk art and pioneer farm tools — is yet another way in which we try to hang onto the past so that our lives might have a sense of continuity and relevance. For the ethnic group, this connection to the past is essential. Knowledge of a shared history, and the passing on of memories in the form of anecdotes and reminiscences, give members of a group a sense of unity and uniqueness. But deciding how that history is presented and what memories are passed on is often a matter of accident, circumstance and argument, as well as economics and politics.

Increasingly, a sense of the past is created and presented through community

celebrations. Such festivals are more than just a relaxing time spent away from work or school. They are also secular rituals, moments in which we renew and redefine our sense of self. The ancestry of festivals is surprisingly old, going back to the pre-Lenten carnivals of medieval Europe. These celebrations were opportunities for the poor to satirize the rich who controlled their lives, and to reverse the morals of everyday life with lusty and drunken behaviour. It was a ritual of release, an escape from the usual routine and grinding hardship of daily life. But the new middle class which began to dominate during the 17th and 18th centuries, feared these disruptions of social order, and enacted laws to control the revelries. At the same time, merchants began to use these festivals as opportunities to sell their goods. More and more, festivals became occasions for decorum and profit while their drunken revelry lessened.

During the 19th century, with the coming of the great world expositions of Paris and London, the festival once again changed. Not only were they trade fairs for the new industries of Europe, these events celebrated the newly-created nation-states. The needs of industry became wedded with laudatory images of national identity. Manning, in his study of modern-day celebrations, talks of the role the festival plays in defining North American communities. He calls them "symbolic battlefields for waging competitive struggles for power, prestige and material objectives."<sup>1</sup> Community celebrations are used to represent the norms and values of the middle class by presenting images of propriety and social success. As traditional society with its dependence on family ties breaks apart, celebrations are more and more providing a basis for shared values and norms.

## II.

Many West Icelanders express a fear that their community is breaking apart and

disappearing with each passing year and each new generation. As Matthiasson describes them, the West Icelanders represent the "paradox of an assimilated ethnic group."<sup>2</sup> They continue to exist; that is, they continue to have a strong sense of themselves as Icelanders. Yet in the usual terms one would use to describe an ethnic group in North America — language, religion, occupation or certain cultural artifacts — there is little to distinguish Icelanders from the Anglo-Saxon majority. Religion plays little part in unifying the Icelanders, and spoken Icelandic is disappearing despite efforts to keep its knowledge alive. There are no occupations in which Icelanders dominate: not all Lake Winnipeg fishermen are Icelandic. Icelanders share the Interlake region with several other ethnic groups, and in Winnipeg, they are no longer concentrated in the Victor and Sargent area. They are, by standard measure, assimilated into Canadian society.

Then in what ways do some Icelanders think of themselves as different from other Canadians? Often Icelandicness is not described as something visible or material, but as something experienced 'inside,' as part of the person's private self, as certain attitudes or dispositions. A few people suggested to me that it was this view of Icelandicness as something internal and fixed that allowed the first settlers to assimilate quickly upon arrival in Manitoba. They knew who they were, and did not fear losing this knowledge even as they spoke a new language in a strange landscape.

Yet a relevant feeling of identity cannot exist separate from either a supporting social context or public symbols. Private feeling and public experience are deeply interconnected, and the loss of public acknowledgement of Icelandic identity makes it difficult to keep such a feeling alive. A public version of identity must be constantly created and used by West Ice-

landers. It is for this reason that practices which are linked to the past take on a symbolic value, because these are seen to be the authentic identity. For many Icelanders who visit from Iceland, there is a radical difference between what is seen by West Icelanders as being 'Icelandic,' and their own life experience. Particularly for younger Icelanders, West Icelandic identity suggests connections with an Iceland they only know from history books. This is not unique to the experience of Icelanders, but is typical of most ethnic groups where 19th century European traditions have been preserved by immigrant descendants. This lack of recognition happens in the other direction as well, when young West Icelanders find Reykjavík radically different from their expectations. A search for a 'real' Iceland, or a 'real' New Iceland forces a rethinking of just what is this thing we call national or ethnic culture.

It is not just the anthropologist who looks for clues during the Festival that might reveal the nature of the present West Icelandic community. West Icelanders also look for clues about themselves, that speak of their memories and their history. Call it what we may — a "mode of understanding" or a "cultural text" to be interpreted — the Festival portrays Icelandic identity in Canada. The Festival is an annual renewal, when people momentarily drop their Canadian identity in favour of an Icelandic one. And this is where the difficulties begin. Today's Festival is filled with uncertainty, ambiguity and a certain fuzziness of definition, which both enriches and threatens it. To interpret *Islendingadagurinn* is to hit against a peculiar mix of history, memory and identity.

History and memory are not the same, but they do include something in common. History is shared by a group of people, and is carried in stories, myths and written records. Memory, on the other hand, is personal, private, and disappears with the

death of the individual. However, both history and memory have a powerful impact on how we live our lives. History shapes our social institutions, our religion and language, the tasks we perform, how we live and what we eat. Memory shapes our everyday action: personal experience gives us understanding and learning. Together, they are the materials with which we create our sense of who we are, both in our imaginations and in the daily activities which sustain us. The past, and the future, are essential to our imaginations. We experience the present and the past in relation to each other, whether that past is rejected as painful or unimportant, or is believed to be more potent and more authentic than the present.

As much as we admire our ancestors and their way of life, however, they no longer inspire our own everyday lives — unless perhaps for the few still following a family tradition of farming and fishing. Perhaps it is because of this that we want to preserve the past, because it is no longer a creative part of our lives. For Icelanders in Iceland, until this century, the past was never far away. What we term "traditional knowledge" was simply the stories, skills and information that were the fabric of everyday life. Though West Icelanders today know the landmarks of national significance in Iceland — scenes from Thingvellir, Gullfoss and Geyser decorate the Festival stage on which the Fjallkona sits — a rural Iclander had (or has) an infinitely richer knowledge.

For West Icelanders, the conditions of history and memory have shifted away from such an oral tradition, and is highly dependent upon the printed word to preserve the past. The result is a lessening of knowledge and sentiment which link people to the West Icelandic community. History is limited to lists of achievements and records of official acts. It is hard to get a sense that these people were like our-

selves, getting drunk or playing jokes as often as they were going to church (well, maybe more often). As families disperse throughout North America, and the bonds of community life weaken, a common Icelandic history becomes more distant, and memories are forgotten. History and memory act to integrate our lives but can also stifle creativity. A rigid and censorious view of history that is concerned with proper appearances can cut us off from the past.

Loss is not inevitable, but effort is necessary to make the past more available to the present. For example, when the first Icelanders established the Republic of New Iceland, they quickly mapped onto the raw landscape of bush and swamp the placenames that were so precious to them. These words no doubt evoked a longing for home, but they also gave a sense of continuity between the old world and the new. Yet these words have all but vanished from the landscape, replaced with the commercially-serving — Distillery Road — or with the bland numbered grid so popular in the West. Do these names have meaning for present residents? Would other ethnic groups in the Interlake like to see old place names — and not just Icelandic ones — returned? This is a question to be asked, with care that it is not an urban view of the past being imposed on a rural one, nor one that serves present political goals. Names that are used in daily life are subtle reminders of who we are.

### III.

In today's Festival, the presentation of the past fits with the multicultural dream of victory over adversity. The ethnic group arrives in the New World only with its ambitions, and is able to carve out a new and successful life that blends the old with the new and improved. I doubt if there is an ethnic festival in North America that does *not* do the same: the community or

ethnic festival gives a picture of how some members of the group wish to be seen. But what is lost to the community when only a partial view of the past is given? This is a dilemma facing any ethnic group caught between fulfilling a model of "success" and wishing to find a way to stay together.

Attendance at *Islendingadagurinn* was declining throughout the 1960s, and there was concern about its continued existence. Perhaps inspired by the 1965 federal policy of multiculturalism, and the celebrations of Canada's centennial year, the Festival was given a facelift. It was changed to a three-day event, with the addition of, among other things, the sailing and car races already taking place in Gimli. Icelandic businessmen from Winnipeg and Gimli established a more efficient Board of Directors and took over the operation of the Festival. The usual programme of speeches and sports became Monday's "traditional programme," and a broad spectrum of entertainments were added on Saturday and Sunday.

Since the changes to the Festival were begun in 1969, criticism has grown of the public portrayal of the Icelandic community in the Festival. Much of the criticism comes from outside the Festival Board, from those active in other Icelandic associations and people interested in their ethnic identity. This opposition differs both in its intensity and in its content.

A current debate questions whether the Festival is or is not Icelandic. There is very little in style which separates it from any other North American celebration: parades, competitions, and midways overwhelm any distinctive ethnic content. The current Board has placed emphasis on keeping the Festival economically solvent, and for good reasons. Attracting more tourists is central to their strategy. Non-Icelandic tourists at the Festival I talked with, though, were puzzled over the "Icelandicness" of the Festival. They could not

see it.

Some West Icelanders criticize this emphasis on finance, which they see as conflicting with the need for more cultural content, as well as alienating a segment of the community. They want more theatre, dance and music, and more emphasis on honouring not only the pioneer past, but also the history of Iceland. Commercialization of the Festival is felt to blunt the authentic feeling and experience which they seek. Interestingly, this desire for more cultural content is also tied up with a public image of success. We can see more and more in Canada how some forms of culture are status symbols. Witness how corporations eagerly buy Canadian art and support theatres and museums. Cultural displays also symbolize the successful community.

Others are less concerned with what the Festival does not present, than with what it *does* present. They dislike the romantic image of the settlement of New Iceland that is described in the speeches and in the short articles published in the Festival programme. They believe that Festival organizers benefit by presenting themselves publicly as the descendants of those who struggled against adversity to achieve success.

The Shriners are a favourite target for those interested in cultural content. Offended by what is seen as middle-class conventionality and lack of Icelandicness, there is criticism of the cost that the Shriners bring to the Festival. Those who support the Shriners say that the parade would be boring without the colourful spectacle so entertaining for the children. They attract more people to the Festival. Whether the Shriners benefit the Festival is not the question here. Rather, it is how their participation emphasizes differences within the community. Those on the economic side of this debate see no difference between how they define the Icelandic Festival and

economic concerns. But those with cultural interests see a contradiction, where Icelandic uniqueness is lost behind a middle-class, North American surface. Yet it is difficult for them to develop cultural alternatives, and not just because of shortages of money and willing workers.

Considerable political negotiation surrounds *Islendigadagurinn*. Editorials are written about the Festival and the disappearance of Icelandic culture. In response, new events are added by the Board, and one can see how the creation of a viable ethnic festival with a perceived "authentic" content has been attempted over the last twenty years. Concern over the disappearance of West Icelandic culture and a willingness to work together despite differences provides common ground. But locked as they are in rehashing the same arguments, frustration and exhaustion are reducing the numbers willing to put effort into the community.

The time has come to rethink what makes ethnicity important for people today, and to gear personal and public efforts toward it. I argue that a revitalization of our relationship to the past, both in written histories and private memories should be of central concern. This requires understanding what makes the experience of the past authentic and relevant to present generations, and gearing the Festival, associations and publications towards supporting it. It isn't a matter of, as one Board member put it, deciding what is Icelandic, and how to capitalize on it. Rather, it is creating an open context for the telling of private stories that are integral to a *West* Icelandic identity.

To begin, old notions of ethnicity as preservation and propriety must be thrown out in favour of recovering a more human past. My definition of the past is not the same as a nostalgia for an idealized golden age, nor is it a place to escape from present social ills. Earlier in the century, when

there was tremendous pressure for immigrants to prove themselves "good Canadians," people willingly censored stories that did not promote the multicultural dream. That is an old battle, already won, and it is time to reopen the past before it is lost altogether. Self-imposed censorship, in both the public and private worlds, must be lifted. This follows recent trends in historical scholarship which focus on everyday life, in all its colourful and at times unsavoury detail. Amongst West Icelanders, there are many such stories which are saved for private telling, or are locked away in diaries. It is felt that they do not fit with public, official Icelandicness, or might be embarrassing to living descendants. In this way, their relevance to West Icelandic identity is overlooked. These stories are a rich resource that are being lost by a self-imposed censorship. For every adult who does not tell a story there is a child who has none to pass along to his or her offspring. Thus a richness and complexity of experience is lost for future generations.

This censorship is not only private but is as well public. It is characteristic of ethnic histories, and not just West Icelandic ones, to present a particular image for public consumption. Fear of embarrassment over

the stories of David Arnason and W.D. Valgardson, and the more recent controversy over Guy Maddin's movie stem from this preconception of what is proper for public eyes. But it overlooks the community's real need for fresh ideas and innovative thinking. Attempts to control creativity harm the West Icelanders' public image rather than the works of these recognized artists. It is to creative works such as these that West Icelanders should look for inspiration.

How does this relate to the Festival? Going to the Festival is associated with family reunions. Winnipeg residents attend in higher numbers than do those from rural areas, so that a return to the Interlake for the Festival is bound up with a return to a personal past. Kin ties have symbolic value amongst Icelanders both because of the tradition of genealogical research, and the importance of the family as a social support in Iceland as well as in Canada during the settlement period. The Gimli area remains a focus for large extended families, and the Festival is an occasion to return to the area. The gathering of the family is a yearly opportunity to tell those stories which keep alive and interesting the West Icelandic past.

Fischer likens the operation of ethnic

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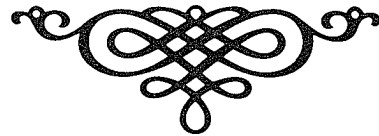
identity to that of dreaming.<sup>3</sup> Fragments of stories, customs and myths are passed on from one generation to the next, and become part of the individual's own life experience. Memory and experience blend together, and in the process transform notions of identity and the past. Ethnicity is a reinvention of the past in the present. It is when the present is seen to deny the past that a sense of rupture or loss is felt. Some people who do not feel that the Festival is relevant to their identity are experiencing this rupture and have stopped attending it altogether. Others are able to use the public Festival as a backdrop to reunite with their personal past in the context of family and friends. Not all experiences and memories become labelled as Icelandic, but that does not mean they are not necessary for keeping alive a sense of connection.

The Festival as a story is confused and

complex, and it does not seem possible that it could be otherwise. Yet it is a story still unfinished, and it is time that new voices, new characters and new twists of plot appear.

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