

# White Settler Reserve

## New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West

RYAN EYFORD



UBC Press • Vancouver • Toronto

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### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Eyford, Ryan, author

White settler reserve : New Iceland and the colonization of the Canadian West / Ryan Eyford.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3158-1 (hardback). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3160-4 (pdf). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3161-1 (epub). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3162-8 (mobi)

1. Land settlement – Canada, Western – History – 19th century. 2. Land tenure – Canada, Western – History – 19th century. 3. Icelanders – Canada, Western – History – 19th century. 4. Colonists – Canada, Western – History – 19th century. 5. Immigrants – Canada, Western – History – 19th century. 6. Indians of North America – Land tenure – Canada, Western – History – 19th century. 7. Liberalism – Canada, Western – History – 19th century. 8. Canada, Western – Colonization – History – 19th century. 9. Canada, Western – Emigration and immigration – History – 19th century. I. Title.

FC3217.4.E93 2016

971.2'02

C2016-902764-3

C2016-902765-1

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### Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Garamond by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Deborah Kerr

Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

Indexer: Lillian Ashworth

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

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# Introduction

ON 18 SEPTEMBER 1877, the Canadian ministers of agriculture and the 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 of colonists in the fall of 1875, the Icelanders had endured hunger, crop failures, and disease, including an outbreak of smallpox that had put the colony under rigid quarantine for almost eight months. The anonymous *Globe* correspondent noted that 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. The article explained that the ministers had visited New Iceland to assess the situation for themselves and to determine whether government support for Icelandic immigration and colonization should continue.<sup>1</sup> This was a matter of politics as well as policy; opponents of Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie’s Liberal government had cited New Iceland as an example of a failed colonization policy. Critics accused government officials of making a grave error in the choice of colony site and characterized the Icelanders as an “effete and unprogressive race ... not equal to the struggle of life on this continent ... [They] must inevitabl[y] succumb to the fate of the ‘least fit.’”<sup>2</sup>

The *Globe* article defended the government against the accusations of incompetence and portrayed the settlers in a favourable light. It described them as worthy colonists – an orderly, literate, and hardworking people



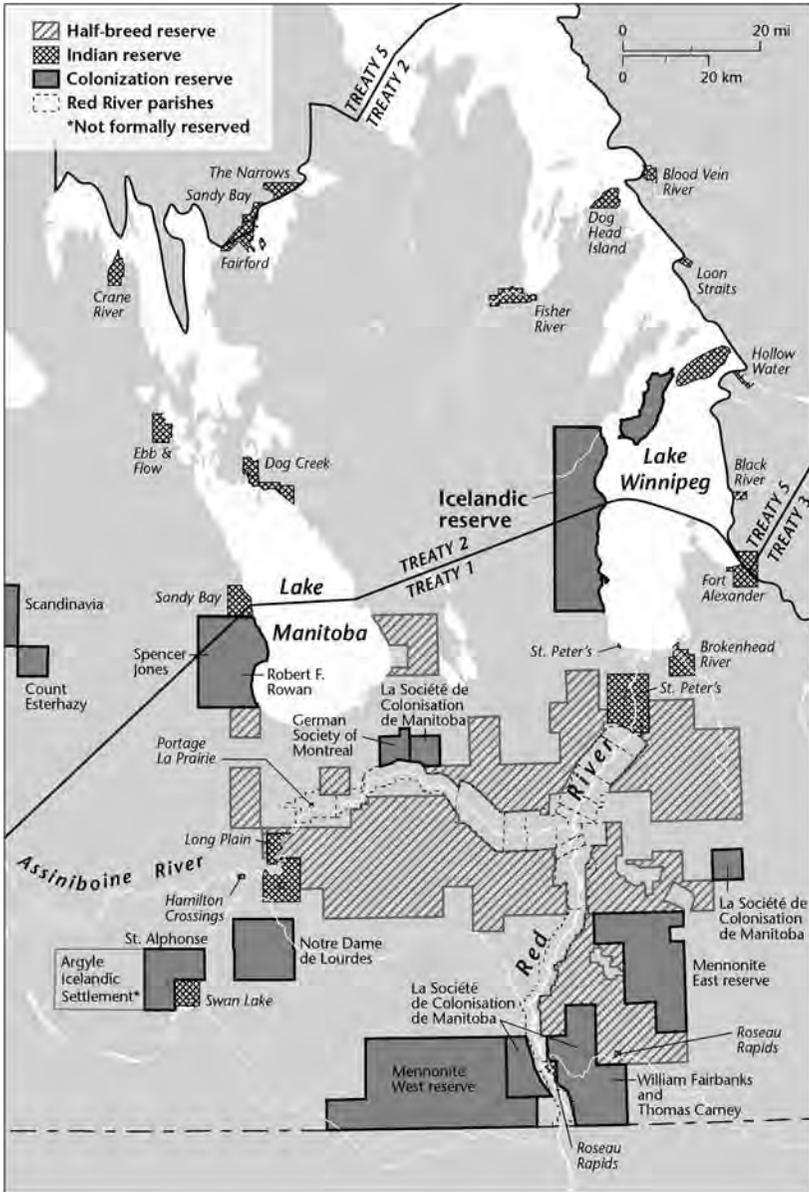
John Lowe (1824–1913), secretary of the Department of Agriculture, a key figure in the establishment of New Iceland.  
*Library and Archives Canada, William Topley Collection, 1936–270.*

intent on achieving social and material progress despite the difficulties they had faced. Casting aside all evidence to the contrary, it boldly declared that “the experiment of this colony may be pronounced a success.”<sup>3</sup> This was hardly the assessment of a disinterested observer; in fact, the author of the article was none other than John Lowe, secretary of the Department of Agriculture, one of the officials who were principally responsible for organizing the colonization scheme.<sup>4</sup> However, Lowe’s article was more than an attempt to whitewash the failures of this particular colony. It was also a defence 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. “Aided colonization in communities,”

Lowe asserted, “is nothing new on this continent. It has succeeded where it has been properly looked after.”<sup>5</sup>

THIS BOOK 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 groups was an important part of Canada’s immigration and land settlement policies in this period. Colonization reserves were part of a patchwork of reserved spaces in Manitoba and the North-West Territories. They were created simultaneously, and they shared borders with reserves for Indians, Metis people, and private corporations, such as the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway.<sup>6</sup> Even areas that were open for homesteading by individuals were in effect reserved, in that they were designated for the exclusive use of incoming non-Aboriginal 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.”<sup>7</sup>

The reserve system developed out of a process of negotiation and contestation as Indigenous peoples pushed for the recognition of their claims to their traditional territories, and as European migrants, who could choose to relocate to 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 Red River 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 Indigenous property rights and minimized the threat of further armed conflict in the region, while at the same time legitimizing the appropriation and redistribution of territory for agricultural and commercial development.<sup>8</sup> 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. Whereas 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.



Reserved land in Manitoba, 1870–86

The southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg, in the Interlake region of what is now Manitoba, was established as a “reserve for Icelanders” by Order-in-Council in October 1875. This tract was one of the earliest colonization reserves in the Northwest.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> The 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.<sup>11</sup> The Canadian government created the Icelandic reserve to encourage the increasing numbers of Icelandic immigrants arriving in Canadian ports to settle in the Northwest. During the mid-nineteenth century, a growing population and adverse environmental conditions put pressure on Iceland’s traditional rural society. Thus, interest in emigration developed during the 1860s, and after 1870 a few individuals and small groups of young people began moving to Wisconsin. Only one of them, 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 movement of whole families. The dominion and Ontario governments worked with the Allan Line to redirect Icelandic migration to Canada by offering generous transportation subsidies. Early settlement experiments in Ontario were largely a failure, and in the spring of 1875 Baptist missionary John Taylor petitioned Ottawa to relieve the suffering of the Icelandic immigrants in the province. That summer the Departments of Agriculture and the 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 suitable tract for an Icelandic colony. This group, called the Icelandic Deputation, selected an area along the west coast of Lake Winnipeg, extending fifty miles north from the 1870 provincial boundary. The first group of about 250 settlers arrived at Willow Point near the southern end of the reserve on 21 October 1875. They dubbed their colony Nýja Ísland (New Iceland) and soon founded the village of Gimli, named for the paradise where, according to ancient Norse myth, 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 fifteen to twenty thousand Icelanders – roughly a quarter of Iceland’s population – came to North America.<sup>12</sup> More than 80 percent of them settled initially in Canada.

The minister of the interior consented to the Icelanders' choice of reserve location despite pre-existing and competing claims from local Indigenous people to have one or more Indian reserves established in the same location.<sup>13</sup> The region was home to Cree, Ojibwe, and Metis people who combined hunting, fishing, and agriculture with involvement in the fur trade as trappers, suppliers of country produce, and wage-labourers.<sup>14</sup> By the early 1870s, permanent settlements had developed at several fur-trade posts and mission stations around Lake Winnipeg, including White Mud River in what became the Icelandic reserve.<sup>15</sup> The Ojibwe and Cree who 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.<sup>16</sup> As a result, several people who lived in what became New Iceland received treaty annuities with the St. Peter's band, whose reserve was near the mouth of the Red River.<sup>17</sup> In 1874, a group of Cree from Norway House petitioned Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris for a reserve in this location.<sup>18</sup> Government officials looked favourably upon this request until the Icelandic Deputation chose the site.<sup>19</sup> 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 Indigenous residents of White Mud River, soon to be renamed Icelander's River by the colonists, that their settlement be designated as an Indian reserve.<sup>20</sup>

This book focuses on New Iceland 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 Indigenous people whom they displaced, to other settler groups, and to the Canadian government. 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 as they attempted to navigate their shifting positions in the new order.

The central problem addressed in these pages is the uneasy fit between colonization reserves and the political, economic, and cultural logic of nineteenth-century liberalism, which, as Ian McKay argues, fundamentally shaped Canada in the century between 1840 and 1940.<sup>21</sup> According to McKay, Canada in this period was "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."<sup>22</sup> How do immigrant colonization reserves such as New Iceland, 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, declared that immigrant group settlements were an aberrant departure from the "normal" type of settlement in which a pioneer individualist breaks away from well-worn paths and seeks freedom on the open frontier.<sup>23</sup> This book puts Mackintosh's interpretation of colonization reserves to the test. How did the reserves relate to the homestead system based on individualized freehold tenure? Were they islands of social, economic, cultural, and political difference, far removed from the mainstream of Anglo-Canadian settler society?

The argument presented here is that, far from being exceptional, immigrant colonization reserves were an integral part of the creation of a new liberal colonial order in the Canadian Northwest. As a state policy, they reflected the various "systematic" approaches to colonization that liberal thinkers developed during the nineteenth century and that were applied in diverse contexts across the British Empire and in the United States.

The spatial practice of reservation helped ensure peaceful relations between Indigenous peoples, 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 western United States. They hoped to duplicate US success in attracting thousands of European agricultural settlers, but they also 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 guaranteed that using force to acquire Indigenous land would be a hazardous gambit. Treaties and Indian reserves helped ensure that Indigenous people did not militarily resist colonization, and immigrant reserves were an incentive to encourage agricultural settlers to apply their labour and capital to the development of the West. For both Indigenous people and settlers, reserved land held the promise of securing collective interests against the claims of other competing groups and of ensuring 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 1880s, 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.<sup>24</sup> It was precisely this promise of being able to re-establish kin, community, and culture in a resource-rich environment, closely tied to local and continent-wide markets by the railway, that led the Icelandic Deputation to choose the reserve site on Lake Winnipeg in 1875.

The paradox of such reserves was that though 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 saw Indian reserves as “social laboratories where the Indian could be ‘civilized’ and prepared for coping with the European” is well known.<sup>25</sup> However, many of the same discourses about civilization and assimilation were applied to the non-English-speaking European immigrants who settled in reserved spaces. Federal officials envisioned the day that, like Indian reserves, immigrant reserves would cease to exist, and their residents would be fully assimilated members of Canadian society.<sup>26</sup> The expected timelines for the two types of reserve 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 various types of reserves. In the case of Indigenous people, certain pieces of legislation, beginning with the 1857 Gradual Civilization Act, defined “Indians” as a distinct category of non-citizens. The “enfranchisement” provisions of these laws laid out a complex process by which individuals could renounce their Indian status and attain Canadian citizenship, but in ways that made it difficult or undesirable for them to exercise this option. Indeed, few ultimately did.<sup>27</sup> Immigrant reserves were governed by the 1872 Dominion Lands Act, which laid out a far simpler path to citizenship: as part of the process of obtaining title to a 160-acre homestead, immigrant aliens were required to become naturalized British subjects. In this sense, the act 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 that were consistent with notions of improvement.<sup>28</sup>

Although the settlers on colonization reserves were granted many more advantages than their Indian reserve neighbours, their path to landownership and full citizenship was not always straightforward. Much to their chagrin, Canadian authorities often treated the inhabitants of the Icelandic reserve as in need of tutelage before they could be entrusted with liberal

rights and freedoms. The colony's problems during its first years tended to reinforce this image of the Icelanders as a backward race, remnants of the ancient European past, whose fitness for the business of colonization in the modern world was suspect at best.<sup>29</sup>

However, from the 1880s until the end of mass migration from Iceland in the first decades of the twentieth century, most assessments of the Icelanders as settlers were extremely positive. Federal officials praised them as model immigrants because of their ability to learn English and their willingness to integrate into the Anglo-Canadian community.<sup>30</sup> 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 mainstream and shared many of its basic goals and assumptions.<sup>31</sup>

Their dramatic transformation from impoverished, backward 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. Contemporary European racial theories posited that Icelanders *should* be part of the dominant race. Canadian elites typically believed that “northern peoples” were ideally suited to become colonists and future citizens, and thus the Icelanders were recruited and settled in the Northwest.<sup>32</sup> For their part, many Icelanders were anxious to avoid being slotted into the exclusionary category of immigrant alien. Through the process of naturalization, they sought to claim the full civil and political rights enjoyed by the white British subjects of the dominion. This process began in New Iceland, whose inhabitants contrasted themselves with the region's Indigenous peoples. When they demanded changes in the administration of their reserve, they did so by distinguishing themselves from their mostly “Half-breed” neighbours, arguing that they should be treated in the same manner as other “civilized” communities.<sup>33</sup> This study therefore offers insights into the legal and cultural processes through which European immigrants in the Canadian Northwest acquired white racial identities.<sup>34</sup>

The case of New Iceland provides an opportunity to rethink the place of non-anglophone, non-francophone 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, and political changes in which liberal discourses were central.<sup>35</sup> 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, they did not always agree about how to achieve this or whether it was even possible in their particular location on Lake Winnipeg. For the disaffected, Ottawa's slowness in extending individual property and political rights to the reserve, and the paternalistic tendencies of the federal colonization agent John Taylor, were among their principal grievances. As they challenged their exclusion from the promises of the liberal order, they simultaneously helped extend its concepts and practices over a new terrain.

In analyzing the Icelandic reserve as a project, or to use John Lowe's terminology, an "experiment" in liberal colonization, this study employs theoretical insights from the literature on the linkages between space, race, and power in colonial societies.<sup>36</sup> Colonization reserves such as New Iceland were part of a process that brought territories and people in north-west 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, and periodic censuses – produced specialized knowledge that enabled Ottawa to govern the region. People and places were linked to one another, and the particular characteristics of each could be quantified and compared in the statistical languages of state administration.<sup>37</sup> How many Icelanders lived in the reserve? What were their birth and death rates? On average, how many acres did they 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 to 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 differed from those of the past. Rather than simply imposing laws or using coercive means to induce compliance, governance 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."<sup>38</sup> The periodic census is a prime example of such tactics. It helped produce "population" as a category, which in turn created new possibilities for the articulation of various administrative projects for improvement.<sup>39</sup> In using this mode of government, the state hoped to shape the behaviour of its

subjects in ways that served its larger purposes. If these were to be accomplished, the people themselves needed to share those ambitions, or at least a set of assumptions about the proper social, political, and economic organization of society. In the Canadian state's late-nineteenth-century colonizing project in the Northwest, 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 word 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 that also leave scope for engaging the localized and historically contingent formations.

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. However, the question of whether these various endeavours amount to a uniform system whose broad global patterns definitively shape events in a multitude of local contexts has been the subject of considerable debate. Nicholas Thomas maintains that global theories of colonialism – whether of the liberal or Marxist variety – obscure the incredible diversity of “colonial projects,” both in differing 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.”<sup>40</sup> 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, though

they might be employed across multiple sites of empire, often took on a form specific to their locale.<sup>41</sup>

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 book generally employs the word “colonization.” This was the term – rather than the more benign “settlement,” which serves to erase the presence of Indigenous peoples – that Canadian officials commonly used to describe their efforts to radically transform northwestern North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their methods were in large measure derived from the philosophical tenets and administrative practices of nineteenth-century liberalism.<sup>42</sup>

Ian McKay’s definition of liberalism – drawn from the work of Fernande Roy and C.B. Macpherson – also attempts to balance general principles with shifting contexts and time-dependent formations.<sup>43</sup> 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.”<sup>44</sup> The rules and institutions that allow liberal individuals to live in community with each other are derived from three core principles: liberty, equality, and property. The importance accorded to each one changes over time, which makes it possible to distinguish between the different historical forms of liberalism. McKay suggests 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 private property.”<sup>45</sup> According to McKay, property rights occupied the paramount position in this 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. Conceptualizing liberalism as a set of principles that are constantly being rearranged into unique formulations across space and time enables us to see “liberal order” 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 community.

Although *White Settler Reserve* uses McKay’s definition, it also incorporates some of the ways in which the contributors to *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* have suggested it might usefully be reconfigured.<sup>46</sup> The most important for this study relate

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 the rights of liberal individuals.<sup>47</sup> Several commentators draw on Uday Singh Mehta’s influential argument that such exclusions were essential 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 that made the actualization of universal capacities conditional upon 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.<sup>48</sup> In his more recent reflections on this issue, McKay too has followed Mehta’s lead to contend 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 people who are imagined as backward and uncivilized.<sup>49</sup> 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 it departs from overtly nationalist historiographies of English and French Canada. McKay’s ideas have been influential among historians of Canada working in both French and English in a wide range of subfields.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, 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 Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault.<sup>51</sup>

A similar perspective is at work in the recent literature on empire, sometimes called the “new imperial history” – the second historiographical current upon which this study draws. 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.<sup>52</sup> Adele Perry's influential work on race and gender in British Columbia has grown out of, and alongside, this literature.<sup>53</sup> I follow 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 owes much to the social and cultural histories of migration and Indigenous-immigrant 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.<sup>54</sup> Despite these similarities, these two literatures have had remarkably little to say to one another. As Adele Perry points out, the tendency to treat immigration and colonization as separate topics obscures the symbiotic relationship between the dispossession of Indigenous people and the building of a white settler population.<sup>55</sup> The challenge is not only to bring Indigenous people, immigrants, and the state into the same analytic frame, but also to reveal the internal complexity and the dynamics of their relationships with each other.

This sort of perspective has been lacking in the 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 policy aimed at facilitating mass migration, railway construction, and agricultural development through a mix of public and private initiatives.<sup>56</sup> Attempts to analyze immigrant group settlement as a separate phenomenon tend to contrast reserves with an idealized "normal" pattern of "individual" settlement that oversimplifies the group and community aspects of British, Anglo-Canadian, or American settlement.<sup>57</sup> The Anglo-Canadian townships in Manitoba were just as much group settlements as their non-British counterparts in the sense that their inhabitants frequently came from the same area. Linked by ties of kinship, ethnicity, and religion, they 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.<sup>58</sup> These parallels were lost to early-twentieth-century political economy and social research, which tended to associate group settlement with ethnic minorities who had gone west to “escape a world which pressed heavily upon them not as individuals but as groups.”<sup>59</sup>

During the 1930s, the sociologist Carl Dawson went beyond the realm of policy to examine the actual social, economic, and cultural lives of ethnic group settlements. However, his conclusions resembled those of earlier studies: he argued that group settlement, or segregation as he called 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. It left many of the groups in a condition of “arrested development” that delayed their “natural” process of assimilation into the Canadian social, economic, and political system, “whose outstanding characteristic was an experimental individualism.”<sup>60</sup> 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 draws attention to the utopian aspects of community settlements in western Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Discussing British, Anglo-Canadian and American, and Continental European communities, he identifies a plurality of “abortive utopias” that sprang from diverse ideological currents ranging from the deeply conservative and religious to liberal-anarchist to socialist visions of a new order.<sup>61</sup>

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.<sup>62</sup> Social historians such as Royden Loewen and Kenneth Sylvester have turned Dawson’s conclusions on their head by suggesting that, far from arresting development, economic and social patterns built on shared ties of language, religion, and culture were crucial to the successful adaptation of migrants. 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.<sup>63</sup> However, these social histories 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 uses insights from Foucault to reinterpret group settlements. 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.”<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> This renewed focus on state power is important, but it runs the risk of resurrecting the false dichotomy between group settlement and its supposedly normal equivalent, with the former inherently communitarian and the latter competitive and individualistic, which does not hold up to micro-level analysis. Even when the intent is to demonstrate how government mechanisms internalized liberal principles of self-rule, this process can easily be 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.<sup>66</sup>

This approach has thus far been absent in the literature on Icelandic immigrants in North America. In comparison to work about other European ethnic groups, relatively little scholarship addresses their migration and resettlement experiences. Until recently, celebratory community histories from the 1950s and 1960s, emphasizing material progress and the personal achievements of Canadians or Americans of Icelandic descent, remained the standard general works on the subject.<sup>67</sup> Two more recent monographs are in large measure derived from these earlier histories and do not engage with the wider literature on migration and ethnicity.<sup>68</sup> 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 Canadian and American academic circles during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>69</sup> One important exception is *Icelandic River Saga*, Nelson Gerrard’s 1985 study of the Icelandic River district of New Iceland. Although presented in the

format of a western Canadian community history book, its careful primary and secondary research has more in common with detailed microhistorical studies of rural communities.<sup>70</sup>

However, historians from Iceland have provided valuable insights into the background, processes, and demographic character of emigration from Iceland between 1870 and 1914. During the 1970s, Jóníus H. Kristinsson and Helgi Skúli 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 migrants, based on parish registers, passenger contracts, and emigrant reminiscences.<sup>71</sup> Kjartansson used these data to produce several articles on the demographic character of Icelandic emigration and has elaborated on the role of shipping in fostering the movement.<sup>72</sup> His recent monograph, co-authored by Steinþór Heiðarsson, compiles and expands on these contributions.<sup>73</sup> Although 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.<sup>74</sup>

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. It focuses 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 Ottawa used these practices in its efforts to colonize northwest North America after 1870. Influential thinkers on colonial questions believed that group settlements of white families were the most efficient method of colonization. The book then more closely scrutinizes the experience of the Icelandic colonists. Through an analysis of the first two contingents of settlers in 1875 and 1876, Chapter 3 provides a detailed picture of their origins, their demographic character, their reasons for leaving Iceland, and their settlement patterns in the reserve. Chapter 4 discusses the processes through which the New Icelanders displaced Indigenous people. 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 each other. 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 Icelandic agent, he employed a paternalistic style of administration that won him both close friends and bitter enemies among the Icelanders. Chapter 6 deals with the efforts of the Icelanders to govern themselves through the creation of a unique municipal system. This local government was critical to their emergence as political subjects aligned with the norms and assumptions of the liberal state, although some Canadian legislators were unwilling to grant them political rights before they had become property owners and naturalized British subjects. The Icelanders' problems in converting their homestead claims into private property are the subject of the final chapter. It explores how Ottawa attempted to use the loan it had 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 entwined with personal liberty and citizenship.

This study of New Iceland offers an opportunity to draw linkages between two historiographies – immigration history and the history of colonialism – that often have little to say to each other, particularly in the Canadian context. The arrival of Icelanders in the Lake Winnipeg region was part of the profound changes experienced by its Cree, Ojibwe, and Metis inhabitants in the years after 1870. Economically, these changes included the restructuring of the fur-trade economy, the signing of the treaties, 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.

This process has been well documented in many other contexts, but what has been less frequently explored is the way that 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 lines separating Indigenous people and European colonizers were blurred. As the Icelanders struggled to survive a series of disasters, government officials and public commentators began to criticize their racial character, questioning their fitness for survival in the modern world. However, as

the Icelandic colonists became more firmly established in their new home, they were drawn ever deeper into the local colonial project and were increasingly engaged in cultivating not only western lands, but also white racial identities.