Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Höskuldur Þráinsson, and Úlfar Bragason, eds. 2023. *Icelandic Heritage in North America*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. 328 pages. ISBN: 9781772840216.

Questions of heritage and identity are current for many North American readers in the twenty-first century. *Icelandic Heritage in North America* is a collection edited by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Höskuldur Þráinsson, and Úlfar Bragason, all three of whom are professors emeriti at the University of Iceland who have dedicated much of their long careers to scholarship on the topic, the former two as linguists and the latter as a literary historian.

Icelandic Heritage in North America is an expanded English translation of the Icelandic-language *Sigurtunga: Vesturíslenskt mál og menning*, published by Háskólaútgáfan in 2018. Three new chapters have been added (Birna Bjarnarsdóttir's, Katelin Parsons', and Laura Moquin and Kirsten Wolf's). A few others have been omitted or substantially adapted, such as Matthew Whelpton's chapter, which now deals more broadly with word meanings in North American Icelandic whereas his chapter in *Sigurtunga*, co-authored with Þórhalla Guðmundsdóttir Beck, focused more narrowly on colour terms.

The editors aim to "describe the Icelandic linguistic and cultural heritage in North America and make this description accessible to English speakers" (2). Most chapters are based on a three-year research project, "North American Icelandic: Heritage Language, Linguistic Change, and Cultural Identity" (2013–2015), known as the Heritage Language Project for short, in which researchers from the University of Iceland visited Icelandic communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Washington, and North Dakota. Contributors to the volume are based in Iceland, with the exception of Kirsten Wolf and Laura Moquin at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Both Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Kirsten Wolf have published with the University of Manitoba Press before, and to readers familiar with the work of scholars in Iceland on topics related to Icelanders in North America, the selection of authors will not come as a surprise. This results in a coherent—almost comprehensive, even—set of contributions that reflect a portion of the field, but it also means that many readers will already be familiar with many of the studies from earlier publications or conference presentations.

After the foreword by Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, the President of Iceland (and a historian), and the First Lady, Eliza Reid, the first part of the book features mainly chapters on cultural and historical topics, followed by those dealing with the linguistics of North American Icelandic (NAI). The introduction, written by

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the three editors, presents a brief overview of earlier research that led to the Heritage Language Project. As the results of many of these previous studies are only available in Icelandic, the authors present a simplified but comprehensive summary of the background that readers might need in order to engage with the book: an overview of the cultural characteristics associated with the Icelandic communities in North America (especially those encouraging bilingualism), a survey of the scholarship on Icelandic history in North America, and a primer on the characteristics of NAI, introducing the specificities of its phonology and phonetics, morphology, syntax, and lexical semantics.

The introduction provides a robust grounding for readers unfamiliar with the linguistic and cultural-historical directions of the research. Ásta Svavarsdóttir's chapter is in a way a continuation of this introductory survey. It focuses on the sociolinguistic characteristics of the Icelandic emigrants in the main emigration period (1870–1914) and the changes affecting their language during this time. She points out that this period coincided with the period when nationalism became a defining narrative and political ideology in Iceland, including pro-independence attitudes. Ásta provides a detailed overview of the language variation in nineteenth-century Icelandic and the comparatively few differences between Icelandic in Iceland and Icelandic spoken and written in North America, from which she concludes that there was very little difference between these language varieties in the main emigration period beyond a limited number of English loan words.

In the following chapter, Ólafur Arnar Sveinsson analyzes the changing concept of a *Vestur-Íslendingur* [lit. Western Icelander] in the public debate and historiography from the 1880s to the present day. He demonstrates that the meaning of this cultural identity has changed over time, charting the shift from often negative connotations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to decidedly positive ones by the mid-twentieth century. Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, in the third chapter, emphasizes the diversity within the Icelandic community in North America and the misleading historiographic tendency to flatten individuals' experiences by focusing on their supposed cultural identity as *Vestur-Íslendingar*. By focusing on the network of politically radical publications and associations, especially those linked to Margrét J. Benedictsson and her husband Sigfús B. Benedictsson, Vilhelm demonstrates the presence of a "community within a community"—feminists, anarchists, socialists, freethinkers, atheists, and Unitarians—that disagreed with the Anglo-Canadian liberal ideology generally supported by the leadership of the Icelandic community. Vilhelm puts this political and ideological diversity back into a historiography that has been largely distorted by the preconception of unity within Icelandic community life.

Alda Möller's chapter is a detailed microhistory of the letter-writing relationship of three brothers: two who settled in Nebraska, and one who

returned to Iceland after a brief stay in the United States. Her study provides an important example of Icelandic settlers who chose to settle in a place without a bloc ethnic settlement and with relatively few other Icelanders and, in the case of one brother, who stopped writing to Iceland after a few years. Similarly, and through family letters, Úlfar Bragason traces the understanding of an Icelandic-American identity in the family of Jón Halldórsson, an early settler in Nebraska who never wanted to live in an isolated ethnic colony and whose five children stopped using Icelandic as children and seem to have fully adopted American values. Úlfar shows this by examining Jón's youngest son's enthusiastic participation in the First World War (though he died of pneumonia before he could reach the battlefield), at a time when opinions on involvement in the war were divided within the Icelandic community.

Shifting away from microhistory and epistolary sources, Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir focuses on the complex and dramatic experience of migration and its symbolic clash with modernity as they are presented in the experimental short story "Vonir" [Hopes] by Einar Kvaran. Birna Bjarnardóttir continues the exploration of Icelandic immigrant authors who thematized the psychological experience of migration and mobility in what she terms the "poetics of migration" (155). She reads the poetry of Stephan G. Stephansson and Undína, focusing on their shared motifs of transcending space, moving, and voyaging, even though their artistic styles were otherwise very different—as were their own lives, even though they arrived in America on board the same ship. Guðrún's and Birna's chapters are reminders of how many works of Icelandic-Canadian and Icelandic-American literature remain untranslated, including the well-known "Vonir" and nearly all of Undína's poetry. Dagný Kristjánsdóttir contributes to studies of the underlying topics of identity and microhistory by considering the sense of belonging of the author J. Magnús Bjarnason, who left Iceland for Canada as a young child with his parents and never returned, yet chose to write exclusively in Icelandic. Her chapter highlights the importance of informal Icelandic cultural networks, as J. Magnús not only kept up with current publications of Stephan G. Stephansson and other popular authors but also mentored younger writers, including Laura Goodman Salverson.

Gísli Sigurðsson returns to interviews about Icelandic folklore beliefs in North America, collected by Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson and Olga María Franzdóttir in the early 1970s. He analyzes the recorded interviews for gendered differences and concludes that female informants tell "women's stories" that are set inside the family, the home, and the Icelandic community. These are indeed the stories that the female respondents chose to tell Hallfreður Örn and Olga María, but Gísli considers this distinction reflective of the distinct position of Icelandic female storytellers. Gísli also views this distinction as potentially applicable to Eddic poems and shows the broader potential of North American Icelandic heritage in literary studies. At the same time, this oral

tradition is also undeniably part of the mythmaking of the Icelandic settlement in America. Informants always choose whether to participate in research, what stories to tell researchers and how to tell them, and both parties cannot help but be involved in the selection processes.

In the collection's sole article on manuscript culture, Katelin Parsons' beautifully written chapter is an exciting contribution to the scholarship on heritage language and literacy. She shows the continuity of the Icelandic manuscript tradition using the example of late manuscripts that she has documented in the Fragile Heritage Project at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies: these are manuscripts which circulated in Icelandic communities and either were brought from Iceland in valuable luggage space or, often, were written in North America. This largely understudied topic in Icelandic manuscript history shows that manuscript culture was still very much alive in the nineteenth and even the early twentieth century, and that scribal production and manuscript collecting must be considered as part of Icelandic-Canadian and Icelandic-American culture and literary practice.

Chapter 11 shifts the attention of the book from questions of cultural heritage to linguistic ones. Matthew Whelpton examines whether word meanings vary between European Icelandic and NAI, looking specifically at terms for colours, kitchen containers, body parts, and spatial relations. He concludes that NAI is closer to North American English than to European Icelandic in the first three categories, while the heritage and parent language remain closer in the spatial relation category. In the following chapter, Sigríður Magnúsdóttir, Íris Edda Nowenstein, and Höskuldur Þráinsson continue to explore the relationship between the heritage language (NAI) and its parent language. They focus on syntax and study several types of syntactically complex sentences (including the recently emerging "new passive") where NAI speakers tend to ignore case cues and interpret word order much more rigidly, as one does in English. This conclusion about NAI speakers largely ignoring case cues is consistent with the findings of studies focusing on speakers of other heritage languages. In the following chapter, Kristín M. Jóhannsdóttir looks at the use of the progressive in NAI and shows that it is used much more frequently in NAI than in European Icelandic. She suggests that this could be caused by a combination of reasons, in particular relatively less exposure and use by the North American Icelanders and linguistic transfer from North American English.

In the penultimate chapter, Laura Moquin and Kirsten Wolf tie the main topics of the volume together, as they look at how community members perceive the association of language with their heritage identities. Their findings contribute to the scholarship on postvernacularity (i.e., the ways in which a language is used after it has ceased to function as a language of everyday communication), showing that most individuals active in Icelandic

heritage communities and associations engage with the language only in postvernacular ways—and, indeed, that in North America the term "Icelandic" generally represents culture, history, and heritage, rather than a language (288).

In the concluding chapter, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir writes about the project's contributions to scholarship on how language affects identity construction and participation in heritage communities. Sociolinguistics and heritage language studies are the main fields that benefit from the findings of the project. Perhaps most interestingly, she points out the importance of the project's findings to developing a more nuanced view of language ideologies. In addition to formal, top-down ideology as expressed and compelled by state language policies, these findings emphasize the importance of language ideologies imposed and enforced within the immigrant communities themselves, which are still present up to four generations later. Many of the authors trace the manifestations of these community-imposed, micro-level ideologies in literacy practices and literature production.

Icelandic Heritage in North America is likely the most comprehensive overview of Icelandic-Canadian and Icelandic-American culture and language to date. It—along with earlier publications by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Matthew Whelpton, and Höskuldur Þráinsson—contributes especially to the study of North American Icelandic as a heritage language. The collection's topics are relatively varied but do focus heavily on sociolinguistics, while some rather obvious cultural and historical topics are not covered (e.g., unions and worker organizing, mining, Icelandic church organizations, sport, etc.).

The linguistically focused chapters are very strong, but they are also relatively specialized, raising the question of who the target audience is, especially considering that the chapters on culture and history do not presume any previous knowledge of the subjects. There is no explicit discussion of why certain topics were included or omitted, or what the aim behind the selection process was. A minor but obvious issue in a collection of chapters written by many authors (many of them translated from Icelandic) is the inconsistency in terminology between chapters, such as the immediately striking example of the "parent language" of North American Icelandic being called variously "European Icelandic," "Icelandic in Iceland," and even, rather bizarrely, "Home Icelandic" in Chapter 13—as if North American Icelandic were not spoken as a home language as well.

Descendants of Icelandic settlers in North America and heritage language scholars interested in North American Icelandic as a case study will benefit from reading this book, as will anyone interested in the Icelandic cultural community in North America in general. Icelandic-speaking readers who already have *Sigurtunga* might want to skip *Icelandic Heritage*, however, as they would already be familiar with all bar three chapters. For readers familiar with scholarship on

the Icelandic community in North America, *Icelandic Heritage* may offer few entirely new insights, but it is nonetheless an important contribution to the research on this imagined community. It is a work that—in conversation with recent works about Icelandic-Canadian authors such as Guttormur J. Guttormsson and Stephan G. Stephansson—provides diverse perspectives on not only the "poetics of migration," but even more on its language, helping us better understand the complexities of Icelandic identity and heritage in North America.

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