

**L.K. Bertram. 2020. The Viking Immigrants: Icelandic North
Americans**

Christopher Crocker

Volume 29, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099162ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/scancan215>

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Publisher(s)

Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada

ISSN

0823-1796 (print)

2816-5187 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Crocker, C. (2022). Review of [L.K. Bertram. 2020. The Viking Immigrants: Icelandic North Americans]. *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies / Études scandinaves au Canada*, 29, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.29173/scancan215>

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L.K. Bertram. 2020. *The Viking Immigrants: Icelandic North Americans*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press. xv + 245 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4426-1366-9.

Recent years have seen a surge of scholarly interest in the culture, history, language, and literature of the Icelanders who immigrated to North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their descendants. Following upon the publication of Ryan Eyford's *White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West* (2016) and Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Höskuldur Þráinsson, and Úlfar Bragason's edited collection (2018), L.K. Bertram's *The Viking Immigrants: Icelandic North Americans* arrives as another valuable and original contribution. Bertram's book helps to deepen our understanding of the development, multiplicity, and persistence of Icelandic cultural identities in a North American context.

The book begins with an introduction providing crucial background information for readers unfamiliar with the history of Icelandic immigrants in North America as well as brief comments on the author's source material and methodological approach. While interacting with previous research on the subject, Bertram's stated goal is to depart from the "continued emphasis on certain forms of cultural expression, particularly literature" in order to grasp the "three-dimensional nature of [Icelandic North American] immigrant culture" (23). With this in mind, the analysis is carried out over five chapters focusing on "popular and commonplace traditions – particularly those previously dismissed as trivial and taboo" (23). Each chapter can be read as a standalone study, but readers will also benefit from the fuller image of the diversity of Icelandic cultural identities that emerges from reading them together. They will also come to recognize how cultural ideas about gender, race, and social classes simultaneously informed these traditions.

The first chapter investigates the "rapidly changing circumstances of migrants' lives" (53) through the history of Icelandic immigrant communities' clothing customs in the late nineteenth century. Rather than interpreting changes in these customs through the lens of deterioration and assimilation, Bertram demonstrates that such changes reflect how Icelandic migrants in North America adapted to their new cultural, physical, and social environments. They offer particular insight, for example, into Icelandic-Indigenous relations and the creation of new social identities and divisions. Remaining in the social sphere, the second chapter concerns Icelandic immigrant drinking cultures, namely those formed around the brewing and consumption of coffee and alcohol. Bertram demonstrates how "coffee and alcohol acted as both cohesive

and divisive forces that illuminated debates over character and conduct” (75) among Icelandic North Americans. The temperance movement, popular among Icelandic women, was especially decisive in terms of gender performance and contesting power within the Icelandic immigrant community.

Folktales and superstitions are the focus of chapter three, which explores how migration to North America triggered changes in Icelanders’ folk beliefs. For example, certain ghosts or spirits were left behind in Iceland while other supernatural beings reflecting immigrants’ new lives and experiences soon appeared. While doubtlessly representative of community beliefs, fears, and memories, Bertram makes a compelling case that folk traditions are also “important resources for understanding popular community discussions of justice and authority” (99). Furthermore, she suggests that the presence of “First Nations ghosts” reveals a sense of settler anxiety among Icelandic North Americans for their role in colonial displacement. Racialized anxieties also played a pivotal role in North American Icelanders’ use of “Viking” imagery, which is the subject of the book’s fourth chapter. As Bertram explains, this kind of imagery initially functioned as a means to overcome waves of anti-immigrant sentiment during the first half of the twentieth century by emphasizing Icelanders’ proximity to Protestant whiteness and, thus, their “immigrant desirability” (106). However, these images also acted as a vessel for women’s political expression, particularly in the Icelandic-language press. As anglicization gradually took hold, “Viking” imagery began to serve more broadly as a collective expression of group identity, which still endures today in highly visible ways.

The book’s final chapter addresses the significance of what may be the most iconic everyday tradition associated with Icelandic North American culture: *vínarterta*. Bertram traces the origins and meanings of this fruit torte as it became a powerful public symbol of North American Icelandic identity, particular during the Cold War period. She shows that *vínarterta* is not a simplistic or static symbol but that, in its different meanings and variety of forms, it can be a subject of fierce debate and provides “a road map for understanding how different generations of North American Icelanders have connected their pasts and presents across three centuries” (160). As an added bonus, following a brief conclusion, the book contains an appendix featuring six historical *vínarterta* recipes, with the oldest dated to 1795. Readers unfamiliar with it can, thus, try their hand at different variations of this iconic dish.

Through its close attention to small but significant details and the everyday, material side of life, *The Viking Immigrants* animates the North American Icelandic experience in a highly original and sensory-rich way, which is complemented by the 36 black-and-white images and illustrations that accompany the text. Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to the study of North American Icelandic culture and history that will also be of interest to scholars working in Canadian history, ethnology, immigration, material culture, and gender and sexuality, particularly in a colonial context. The only significant

point of criticism I can offer concerns the book's title, *The Viking Immigrants*, which may be slightly misleading. Of course, the invocation of the Vikings in the title likely renders the book more appealing to a broad audience. I suspect that those who reach for it on this account will be pleasantly surprised by the depth and scope of Bertram's study.

Christopher Crocker
University of Manitoba, 2022