Edith Fowke 1913-1996

Phil Thomas

When the Canadian Society for Traditional Music had its 1995 Conference/AGM in Toronto last November, Edith Fowke gave a fine paper on Folk Song in Literature. She appeared to be in fairly good health for her 82½ years. When I visited her at home, she was full of plans, with three manuscripts readying for publication and others in mind. News of her death in hospital on March 28 was unexpected. It was especially regrettable, for she was far from finished her self-appointed task of publishing folk song and folklore in Canada. Death at her age, after a full and rewarding life, should not be taken as a time for lamenting, but rather as a time for celebrating her accomplishments.

My association with Edith goes back to 1952, when we corresponded about songs in her CBC Folk Song Time program. Without her vision and dedication, Canada’s folk songs would not be available to the public. I was privileged to have been able from here in BC to support her endeavours, and I am deeply grateful for her encouragement in my own work.

In a period of over 45 years, Edith Fowke progressed from being an MA-in-English, writer, and editor, with a fresh awareness and delight in folk songs to becoming one of the foremost folklorists in the English-speaking world. Becoming aware that no field collecting had been pursued west of Quebec, she found singers in Ontario and produced several books from their repertoires. In 1971, Fowke was appointed a professor in the English Department at York University. Here she taught courses in Canadian folk song, balladry, and folklore. To answer the need for a textbook, she produced Folklore of Canada in 1976, following the form of work by the USA’s doyen of folklorists, Richard Dorson.

In addition to her publications, Edith Fowke edited The Canadian Folk Music Journal from its inception in 1973. Her own articles and entries may be found in several Canadian encyclopedias as well as in international journals. Further, she edited and did background notes for six LP recordings containing selections from her fields recordings, produced in the USA and in the UK.

In Canada, Edith Fowke now stands beside Marius Barbeau, who has long been Canada’s most noteworthy folklorist. Her fellow Canadians have not waited till her death to honour her; in 1978, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Canada, and in 1983, she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

One way to define a person is to contrast that person’s actions with those of another. Helen Creighton’s work left us wondering what songs her informants loved she rejected; Edith’s approach to folk song collection was considerably more inclusive. Creighton believed in ghosts; Edith believed in people.

It must be gratefully acknowledged that in her work Edith has left a monument to her early vision. During the 1950s, she stated her view on her weekly CBC Folk Song Time programs; at the beginning of each program, the script asserted that the songs on the program were presented in the belief that they reflected the lives of the people who made them. The motivation for her life’s work was her profound belief in this special significance of genuine folk songs. Her memorial is her popular song books which can be found across this country in private, public, and school libraries, books she created to make available songs which have sprung from and which, thus, specially reflect the lives of Canadians.

Some Thoughts on a Lasting Legacy

Robert Rodriguez

In the Last Chorus column in Sing Out! (41.2), Neil Rosenberg was most eloquent in his recollections and remembrances of the extraordinary life and numerous accomplishments of the late Edith Fowke. Even now it is hard to imagine our world, and especially Canada, bereft of her presence and all that her life and work entailed. I recall listening with rapt fascination in November 1995, at the Annual General Meeting of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music in Toronto, as Fowke delivered her paper dealing with erotic, bawdy and scatological songs found in British literature since the time of Shakespeare.

Although traditional folk music was Edith’s central world, she had no qualms about entering hitherto-unexplored musical territory, as evidenced by her in-depth article on the origins, history and present popularity of the phenomenon of filksongs within the science fiction and fantasy communities, presented in the Bulletin’s Summer 1989 issue (23.2). Many within the filk community have assessed it as one of the best articles about filk and its history that they have ever encountered.

There is, however, one important element of Fowke’s work that Mr. Rosenberg did not mention in his thoughtful epitaph: her love of and interest in the oral narrative and traditional folk story, especially as it applies to the Canadian cultural experience. Like the late Helen Creighton, another renowned 20th-Century Canadian folklorist and collector, Edith Fowke loved a good story in all variations and types: be it a First Nations creation myth, a Jack tale from Newfoundland, a Gallic hero tale from Cape Breton, a religious legend from the Northwest Territories or a modern ghost story or urban legend from present-day Toronto. Fowke truly believed that, like traditional songs, the traditional folk story is a living, growing entity, sustaining itself