

Some Thoughts on a Lasting Legacy

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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

with new life as it goes from teller to teller, and it should not be simply reduced to frozen words on a stultified printed page or doomed to be shut within a dark cubby-hole to be merely an object of scrutiny for academics.

With this in mind, four notable books with which Fowke was involved during her lifetime should be mentioned, volumes that are testimonies to her enduring excellence as editor, collector and reteller of many of Canada's myths, legends and traditional folk narratives, which make up cultural mosaic, still vibrant to this very day.

1. **Folklore of Canada**, compiled and edited by Fowke, published in 1976 by McClelland and Stewart, Toronto; even after two decades, this is still considered to be a vital part of the canon of Canadian volumes giving an overview of the diverse elements that make up Canada's rich folklore heritage. Numerous examples of the oral narrative are contained in this volume, from tall tales of the prairie provinces to Native tales of creation and stories brought by the various European groups who settled Canada several centuries ago.

2. **Folktales of French Canada**, edited by Fowke, published in 1979 by New Canada Publications, Toronto, a volume of traditional tales, stories, legends and anecdotes originally collected and still told in Québec. Fowke dedicated this volume to the memory of Marius Barbeau, who, together with his disciples, spent many years collecting, analyzing and publishing thousands of traditional tales in French, then had them translated into English; as Fowke cogently points out, he was a superior force

in the dissemination of the traditional folk culture of both the Québécois and the Native peoples of Canada during the early years of the 20th Century.

3. **Tales Told in Canada**, edited by Fowke, published in 1986 by Doubleday Canada Ltd., Toronto, an excellent general survey of the numerous types of traditional tales told within Canada. The tales were collected from the Maritimes to the Northwest Territories and from Québec to British Columbia, and covered a wide range of story types: creation myths and origin stories, wonder tales, jests and anecdotes, ethnic jokes, ghost stories, religious legends, and urban legends. As diverse as were the tales in scope, Fowke's excellence in scholarship was evidenced by her meticulous notes and bibliographic references appended to each tale.

4. **Legends Told in Canada**, edited by Fowke, published in 1994 by the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, in which four centuries of Canada's rich cultural heritage and history are spanned in her retelling of 22 unusual, often haunting, strange or sometimes bizarre legends, again covering the length and breadth of Canada.

In a life filled with so many accomplishments and plaudits, to me these four volumes represent some of the very best that Edith Fowke left to this world. As she told me in a phone conversation in the early 1970s, a good story never dies; it keeps going and renewing itself. May her legacy and memory be as enduring, now and always.