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
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 Quebec. 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 Quebecois 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 Quebec 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.

Our Back Pages

This feature got left out last time due to space constraints, so here’s half a year’s worth at one go.

Fifteen Years Ago
Bulletin 15.3 (Fall 1981). This issue’s main offering was an article "Contemporary Traditional Music in Newfoundland" (no, not an oxymoron!) by Gerald Thomas of MUN. Also included: "Constitutional Changes for the CFMS?" (no, times haven’t changed that much!) by Dave Spalding, reviews of Robert C. Cosby’s book All In Together Girls, Stan Rogers’ Northwest Passage (has it been that long?), MacNaughton and Smith’s Fiddlin’ for Steppers, Shute and Null’s American Primitive, and Marius Barbeau’s book Le Rossignol y chante. Short pieces on "The Folk Singers" radio program and the Beaton Institute, and the column "Ali’s Corner," round out the issue.

Bulletin 15.4 (Winter 1981). Feature articles this time were "Songs and a Sense of Place" by Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat, and "Brandywine," in which Dave and Andrea Spalding discuss their experiences entertaining children. There’s a review of Lois Choksy’s book The Kodaly Context and columns by Alistair Brown and Jon Bartlett ("Last Post"). The issue also has an historic aspect, as Jon and Rika’s editorial announced their decision to lay down the burden of editorship in the near future.

Ten Years Ago
Bulletin 20.3-4 (December 1986). This was a double issue, reflecting the CSMF’s hard times and my [JL’s] struggle to get a grip on editing. The main articles were "The First Non-Native Canadian Folk Song?" by Tony Stephenson (recounting a song/poem found in a couple of the Norse Vinland sagas), "The Dressings We Put on Our Lives" by Martin Rossander (reminiscences of a musical life) and "Folk Music?" by Tim Rogers, an evocative contribution to the "What is folk music?" debate. There were a plethora of folk festival reviews and retrospectives by a plethora of authors, and Murray Shoolbraid’s column "Folk Notes and Queries." Murray also contributed a couple of fiddle tunes ("Exposition Reel" and "Curtis Shull"), while songs "Hurray for Camp Borden", "The Cat Got on the Lamp" and James Keelaghan’s "The Fires of Calais" also were included.