

Edith Fowke 1913-1996

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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 field 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.