

Magnùs Einarsson, (Folklorist)

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OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

Magnús Einarsson, Þjóðháttufræðingur (Folklorist)

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On January 11, 1999, friends and colleagues gathered at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation (CMC) in Hull, Quebec to honour and enjoy our memories of Magnús Einarsson. Magnús had worked at the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies (CCFCS), the folklore division of CMC, since 1969. He had taken early retirement from his position just over a year before his death on December 7, 1998, at age 57, of Wegener's granulomatosis, an extremely rare autoimmune disease. In keeping with Magnús' wishes, the CMC gathering was quite informal; we talked about Magnús' importance to us as a scholar, mentor, and intellectual gadfly.

Magnús was born in Iceland, and was raised by his grandparents until the age of ten. He spent his youth in the United States and Italy with his aunt and her American husband who adopted him so that he could stay in the U.S. He completed an M.A. in Folklore at Indiana University, under the supervision of Linda Dégh. Shortly after the conclusion of his doctoral research there, where he had also served as Folklore Institute archivist and designed its legend index, Magnús was invited to join the CMC (then National Museum of Man) staff by Carmen Roy, successor to Marius Barbeau. There, Magnús divided his attention between the recording of Icelandic-Canadian folklore and collecting, researching, and curating the Museum's first "permanent" (1977-1987) exhibit of Canadian folklife and ethnology, "Everyman's Heritage," as well as compiling and publishing a book of photographs, *Everyman's Heritage: An Album of Canadian Folk Life* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1978), reflecting the exhibit's themes. He was also a significant collaborator in the exhibition and book *From the Heart: Folk Art in Canada* (Toronto/Ottawa: McClelland and Stewart/National Museum of Man, 1983), the first all-Canada exhibition of folk art, which was displayed in museums across the country

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Magnús recorded the life histories and documented the repertoires of immigrant folk artists, and began work on his three volume magnum opus of Western Icelandic traditions: *Icelandic-Canadian Oral Literature* (Ottawa, CCFCS Mercury Series #63, CMC, 1991), *Icelandic-Canadian Memory Lore* (CCFCS Mercury Series #64, CMC, 1992), and *Icelandic-Canadian Popular Verse* (CCFCS Mercury Series #65, CMC, 1994). At the new CMC facility, he planned and executed three exhibits, including “Just For Nice: German-Canadian Folk Art” (with Helga Benndorf Taylor, Hull, CMC, 1993).

Magnús was critical of CMC’s rigid dichotomisation of “folk” and “ethnic” culture (the responsibility of CCFCS) from the cultures of Canada’s French and English “founding” peoples (the responsibility of the History division) and aboriginal peoples (the responsibility of Ethnology). One internal memo by Magnús states:

We are in the business of recording/studying the cultures of various communities (ethnic, religious, regional, Canadian occupational, social organisations, etc.). Our primary interest is in expressive and symbolically charged communication. We examine not just the folk or traditional layer of [these communities] but the spectrum of their expressive/symbolic output....If this is the case then our present official identification with folk and folk culture is inaccurate and offensive and our strong unofficial identification with ethnics is inaccurate....(M.E., 9/5/1995).

Considering Magnús’ generally forward-thinking conceptualisations of folklore/ethnology, it may surprise some that his scholarly output of exhibitions, catalogues, books, and articles focuses more upon documentation than upon scholarly analyses. His colleague and friend Robert Klymasz attributes this to Magnús’ essentially ordered personality, but his narrative catalogues and neat office always seemed to me paradoxical considering his enthusiasm for the unconventional, the marginal, and the quixotic. Magnús simply loved talking about ideas, working with them, extending them, molding them, and sometimes also dismissing them. Yet very few of his insights made their way directly into print.

Perhaps because he was often uninterested in or unable to follow up on his plethora of intuitions and ideas, he bullied, nagged, challenged, harangued and cajoled others into doing so. For this reason, he served as a mentor and gadfly for many who worked with him. Nevertheless, he remained essentially modest about his prodigious influences, rather than succumbing to the temptation to appropriate credit and glory.

This is not to suggest that Magnús was easy to get along with or lacking in rough edges. He enjoyed an argument and he appreciated those who stood up to him, but he had no time for people who lacked the willingness, confidence, or ability to engage him in debate or controversy. If life were reckoned as a folktale, Magnús would be one of those pivotal, bizarre, yet difficult helpers — a bright, shining bird who asks for a piece of flesh to carry you over the water, a witch who grants you three wishes, or perhaps the grumpy old man who guards the castle threshold and must be cajoled into letting you across. These figures give hints and assistance, yet always maintain a mysterious and profoundly inaccessible quality, and they ask much of those with whom they come into contact. In another genre, from his native Iceland, perhaps Magnús would be one of the *huldufolk*, the hidden people. These paradoxical characters are elves, but also human beings, who just happen often to be invisible and live inside solid objects — rocks and caves. Though concealed, they can manifest themselves to normal human perception. Yet this always happens when *they* want, never when *we* want, and the *huldufolk* are never, never under *our* control. Just a little bit better than regular humans, they're a bit smarter, a bit cagier, and a bit more flexible. Like Magnús.

Magnús was cremated in Ottawa. His friend and colleague Phil Tilney will take his ashes to Iceland this summer, where they will be buried with those of his grandparents in Hafnarfjörður.