

## Edith Fowke (1913-1996)

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## **OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE :** **EDITH FOWKE (1913-1996)**

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Edith Fowke's death, March 28, 1996, was a national event, marked within a few days by special, extended notices in, for example, the *Globe & Mail*. To sketch adequately her wide and profound effect on Canadian folklore studies is impossible in a small space. Of those who worked most closely with her, no two seem to have been affected in quite the same way. The account that follows, then, is necessarily very partial.

Fortunately, the outlines of Edith's "life in folklore," as she called it, are well known: through biographical entries in such reference works as the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* and her own talks and articles (e.g., 1990). Fortunately, too, she had long been widely honoured in Canada: as a Member of the Order of Canada, Fellow of the Royal Society, and recipient of several doctorates *honoris causa*.

Certain ideas and values guided Edith's work in folklore. She emphasized the distinction between songs and other lore that had gone "into tradition," which were her most passionate interest, and those that had not. Among traditional song variants she favoured those that were "well-worded" or had distinctive texts, and sought assurance from musical collaborators that particular items had "good tunes." As she repeatedly stressed the need to give folklore "back to the people," I believe her goal of publishing only the best works of a particular kind stemmed from a sense of obligation to present in the best possible light the people whom she owed so much.

In assessing singers and storytellers, her criteria adhered to the quantitative aesthetic discerned among the "folk" by her close friend and co-worker Kenneth Goldstein (1991). In particular, she encouraged and celebrated tradition bearers who knew many items in complete versions. Her close rapport with those whom she recorded is evident on her field tapes (housed largely in the SMIL collection at York University's Scott Library) in the constant

ease and fluency with which they performed for her, generally in a single uninterrupted take.

Edith's compilations of traditional materials included printed anthologies, commercial recordings, and broadcasts on national radio and TV. In all these media, she grouped her materials carefully. She adopted scholars' categories (e.g., the Child ballads she loved so much), highlighting particular uses or contexts (e.g., lumbering songs), regional and ethnic origins (e.g., the Ontario and Irish songs she ardently championed), points of historical interest (especially in Canadian history), and literary genres she particularly cherished (e.g., the romantic narratives she found so characteristic of North America).

Her works were enthusiastically awaited by professionals and amateurs in the post-war folksong revival. These included "source" singers themselves, with whom she often established direct contact by broadcasts and recordings. Through such landmark publications as *Folklore of Canada*, *Folk Songs of Canada*, *Sally Go Round the Sun*, and *Red Rover, Red Rover*, she reached and influenced educators and their pupils, parents and their children, choral groups and composers, storytellers and novelists.

Edith's work as an editor, both for her own publications and for the *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, which she founded and worked on until her death, was of a piece with her social and aesthetic mission. She strived tirelessly to achieve directness of expression, patiently excising high-falootin' diction, tolerating no wordiness, and changing awkward constructions into graceful ones. Her generous service to scholars and authors ranged from compiling bibliographies and reference lists (always select) to participating energetically in such organizations as the recently re-named Canadian Society for Traditional Music and the Writers Union, where she was active till the end.

She collaborated vigorously with individual partners on most of her major monographs: other folklorists and collectors of traditional music, as well as musicians, musicologists, translators, and illustrators. Indeed, she quietly compiled the liner notes for most of the LPs La Rena Clark, her favourite "discovery," privately issued — in order, again, to present the singer and her songs in the best possible light. In parallel fashion, Edith contributed invaluable references to Alice Kane's *Songs and Sayings of an Ulster*

*Childhood*, and in the past year had begun with great excitement to prepare all the songs she had collected for an international database.

Edith's folklore activities were connected to enduring social commitments: to the labour movement, post-war Canadian nationalism, and a populism that comprised ethnic advocacy and feminism. She annually found time and energy to travel to hear some of her favourite singers at folk music festivals in Britain, to meet with old and new friends and present papers at conferences here and abroad, to voice her opinions and submit reports at business meetings, to edit the *Journal* and manage its affairs, and until she was 80, to teach her course on ballads at York's Winters College.

Characteristically, her last conference presentation focused on a topic on which she had never written extensively and yet for which she was most qualified: the use of traditional materials in Canadian English-language writing of the past two centuries. At her death, she had been working on several major projects: an anthology of bawdy songs with Goldstein, a wide-ranging anthology of Canadian women's songs with Beverlie Robertson, a set of recordings to accompany her recent book on LaRena Clark, and, combining several of her interests and aptitudes, a folksong cookbook, with a song for every recipe.

For a long while, it has been clear that not only folklore itself but also the ways folklore has been studied and disseminated by its students have done much to shape ethnic and national identities. Just as it is hard to imagine studying Canadian folklore without considering Edith's works and ways, so too — to adopt a current usage — it will be hard to "imagine" Canada and its English-language traditions without remembering Edith.

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