

‘A Very Lone Worker’: Woman-Centred Thoughts on Helen Creighton’s Career as a Folklorist

Diane Tye

Volume 15, numéro 2, 1993

Femmes et traditions
Women & Tradition

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083201ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083201ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Tye, D. (1993). ‘A Very Lone Worker’: Woman-Centred Thoughts on Helen Creighton’s Career as a Folklorist. *Ethnologies*, 15(2), 107–117.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1083201ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article étudie les rapports entre le travail d’Helen Creighton comme femme et sa place parmi les folkloristes canadiens. Sa conception du folklore — que l’on retrouve à la fois dans ce qu’elle a recueilli, dans sa manière de le recueillir ainsi que dans la diffusion de ses travaux — aussi bien que l’accueil qu’elle reçut du public et des savants sont liés, en partie, à des normes de conduite féminine, selon la définition de la société et selon sa propre définition. Maintenant que son travail est abordé dans de nouvelles perspectives et estimé pour son éclectisme, il montre à quel point les marginaux voient les choses dans une optique différente.

‘A VERY LONE WORKER’: WOMAN-CENTRED THOUGHTS ON HELEN CREIGHTON’S CAREER AS A FOLKLORIST¹

Diane TYE

Mount Allison University

As a new student to folklore in the late 1970s, I considered the dichotomy of popular and academic folklore pursuits an important classification. I quickly learned that this was one way academics or “academic wanna bes” separated themselves from “other” — in this case, performers and enthusiasts not formally educated in folklore studies. I believed members of the latter group were reflexive, rather than reflective, about materials they collected, and therefore, were undeserving of the title, “folklorist”, which I happily appropriated. Fellow Maritimer, Helen Creighton, provided me with a local example of such a popularist. At a time when folklore studies focused almost exclusively on theoretical questions of performance, context and function, her work seemed highly descriptive and almost irrelevant, despite the large body of data she collected.² As an academic folklorist, I was quick to identify folklore’s (mis)representation by popularizers, but was less willing — or able — to identify my own commodification of folklore and performers.³

Fifteen years later, I recognize that like most regional collectors, Helen Creighton was not atheoretical. Rather, principles that underlie her work are as complex as those that motivate academic folklorists.⁴ Recently, both Jeff Webb

-
1. In preparing this paper, I benefitted from discussions with Ian McKay and Neil Rosenberg. Pauline Greenhill read an earlier version and offered helpful suggestions. I also gratefully appreciate the assistance of staff at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia (hereafter referred to as PANS).
 2. Carole Henderson Carpenter, *Many Voices: A Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and their Role in Canadian Culture*, Ottawa, National Museums of Canada, 1979, p. 41, notes that despite Creighton’s widespread popular appeal and recognition as folklorist, “she has had regrettably little direct effect on the evolution of folklore studies in Nova Scotia or throughout English Canada largely because of her lack of academic affiliation”.
 3. This tendency can be seen in Richard Tallman’s remarks concerning Creighton. He writes “To the professional folklorist, the extent to which Creighton emphasizes the adaptation and exploitation of her collected works to other media is alarming, not because folklore should never be used in this manner but because popularizing tends to misrepresent the folk culture to the general public. Inevitably popularization focuses on the quaint, the romantic, and the curiously rustic.” Richard S. Tallman, “Folklore Research in Atlantic Canada: An Overview”, *Acadiensis*, 8.2 (Spring 1979), p. 122. Tallman does not reflect on the possibility that misrepresentation, to say nothing of appropriation and exploitation, may take place at the hands of academic folklorists, as well as popularizers.
 4. For a re-reading of B. A. Botkin’s place in American folkloristics, see Jerrold Hirsch, “Folklore in the Making of B. A. Botkin”, *Journal of American Folklore*, 100 (1987), p. 3-38.

and Ian McKay have presented new readings of Creighton that locate her within ideological movements of the early twentieth century.⁵ This article is an effort to further resituate Creighton by sharing some preliminary thoughts about the relationship of gender to her place in the intellectual history of Canadian folkloristics. Most Maritimers, and many Canadians, identify Helen Creighton (1899-1989) as one of the country's leading folklore collectors.⁶ Born into a well-established upper middle-class Nova Scotian family, Creighton attended the privately run Halifax Ladies Academy from 1914-1916 and grew up socializing with members of the provincial elite. As a young woman she tried her hand at several occupations, including war-time ambulance driver and teacher, but journalist held more appeal. In Mexico she wrote her first feature article, "Have You Ever Seen a Bullfight?" which she published in the *Toronto Star* under the pseudonym, "Golliwog".⁷ When back in Nova Scotia the following year, she adopted the title of "Aunt Helen" and broadcast a series of children's stories over a local radio station. Several people — including Henry Munro, Superintendent of Education for Nova Scotia — directed Creighton to the province's folksong corpus for interesting subject matter for articles. W. Roy Mackenzie's *Ballads and Sea Songs of Nova Scotia*⁸ — based on his collecting along the province's north shore — appeared in 1928 and Munro and others advised Creighton there might be a ready market for folksongs — and publications about them — from other parts of Nova Scotia. She took their recommendation and while she continued to publish articles on other subjects, she became increasingly associated with provincial folksong and folklore.

Creighton was a self-taught folklore collector. She once called her early efforts "amateur," as she struggled to record both the singers' words and tunes by hand.⁹ In the early 1930s, after the publication of her first collection, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia* (1932), she teamed up with Doreen Senior. Senior, a trained musician from England who was heavily influenced by the English Folk Song movement, was in Nova Scotia to conduct a summer school in folk dance. She collected with Creighton outside of class time and returned to go on more extensive field trips with her. While the two women later differed in their views concerning the recording and use of folksong,¹⁰ their collecting efforts produced

5. Jeff A. Webb, "Cultural Intervention: Helen Creighton's Folksong Broadcasts, 1938-1939", *Canadian Folklore Canadien* 14,2 (1992), p. 159-170 and Ian McKay, "Helen Creighton and the Politics of Antimodernism", in *Myth and Milieu Atlantic Literature and Culture, 1918-1939*, ed. Gwendolyn Davies, Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1993, p. 1-16.

6. For example, Donald Cameron, "Thanks for the Memories", *Weekend Magazine*, 28 September 1974, p. 11 described Creighton as "perhaps English Canada's most important folklorist" and Marjorie Major, "A Review of A Life in Folklore", *Axiom*, 2:3 (1976), p. 26 referred to her as "Canada's foremost folklorist".

7. Helen Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975, p. 44.

8. W. Roy Mackenzie, *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*, Cambridge, Harvard, 1928. Rpt. Hatboro, P.A., Folklore Associates, 1963.

9. Helen Creighton, "Collecting Folk Songs", *Music Across Canada* 1:3 (April 1963), p. 10.

10. See Creighton's correspondence with Doreen Senior, PANS MG1 2817 #146.

Twelve Folksongs from Nova Scotia (1940) and *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* (1950).

Creighton first mechanically recorded songs on a dictaphone she borrowed from her father.¹¹ Institutional support came in 1942 when the Rockefeller Foundation provided her with a fellowship to use the Library of Congress equipment — a Presto recording machine — to cut discs of Nova Scotian folksong. This funding also included sponsoring what was to be her only formal training in folklore, a summer session of the Indiana Folklore Institute offering courses in folksong and folklore. Canadian support came from the National Museum who made her a Museum Advisor in 1947 — they maintained this appointment until 1964 — and from 1949 supplied her with a tape recorder.

The influence of the English Folksong and Dance movement — especially as expressed through Doreen Senior — is clear in the arrangement of *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* where there is a stronger emphasis on tune and on the classical ballads than in her first publication. However, particularly after her participation in the 1942 summer institute at Indiana, Creighton was aware of American folkloristics and corresponded with some of the leaders in the field.¹² Perhaps in part on the advice of those like Stith Thompson who urged her to expand her area of expertise from folksong to all of Nova Scotian folklore, she broadened her field in terms of genre, geography, and ethnicity. Subsequent publications reflect this increased range: *Folklore of Lunenburg County* (1950); *Bluenose Ghosts* (1957); *Maritime Folksongs* (1961); *Eight Folktales from Miramichi* (with Edward D. Ives, 1962); *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (with Calum MacLeod, 1964); *Bluenose Magic* (1968); *Folksongs of Southern New Brunswick* (1971); *A Life in Folklore* (1975); and *Lafleur du rosier: chansons folkloriques d'Acadie* (with Ronald Labelle, 1988). The fruits of a lifetime of collecting as contained in both her published collections and unpublished papers deposited in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia constitute an important resource of regional folklore.

Creighton's experience illustrates that the academic/popular division is not always distinct.¹³ Although she was positioned outside of academy, and geographically located away from centres of power, Creighton's identification of W. Roy Mackenzie's folksong collection as a model and Doreen Senior as a mentor indicate that she was aware of, and guided by international academic

11. Cameron, p. 13.

12. Academics such as Stith Thompson were reportedly enthusiastic supporters. Letter to Helen Creighton from Wayland Hand, 12 June 1982, PANS MG1 2791 #19. She sought their guidance as much on how to make a living from her collecting as on matters of interpretation. See Letter to Helen Creighton from Stith Thompson, 23 March 1944, PANS MG1 2818 #132; and Letter to Helen Creighton from B. A. Botkin, 29 August 1944, PANS MG1 2810 #151.

13. Ironically, Richard Dorson, a perpetrator of the division between academic folklorists and popularizers endorsed Creighton's work. See letter to Helen Creighton from Richard Dorson, 2 March 1956, PANS MG1 2812 #53.

guidelines.¹⁴ Certainly Creighton's surviving correspondence links her to a large network of established folklore scholars in North America. She was influenced and sought advice from many folklorists, including Stith Thompson, Marius Barbeau, Edward D. Ives, Wayland Hand and Richard Dorson.¹⁵

Creighton valued her connections with the academic world and highlighted her attendance at Indiana's Summer Folklore Institute.¹⁶ Some others writing about Creighton have invested this brief course with equal importance so that she occasionally she is presented as a graduate of Indiana.¹⁷ She was immensely proud of her six honorary degrees and extensively used the title, "Dr. Creighton".

At the same time she emulated folklore scholars, she intended that her work be distributed beyond the academic community. Part of Creighton's focus, and one academic folklorists are only now coming to share, was the native audience. While Jeff Webb notes that her publications and broadcasts were more directed at members of the provincial middle class and elite than individuals and communities who provided her with the stories or songs,¹⁸ she directed materials to trained and untrained audiences. Her immense success in disseminating collected materials contributed to her widespread popular reputation as a folklore collector.

Creighton straddled the two camps in part because as a woman, it was difficult, if not nearly impossible, for her to gain full entry into the male academic world.¹⁹ Her links with eminent folklore scholars led to an invitation to return to Indiana's Folklore Institute to lecture on fieldwork practice, but she never held an academic position.²⁰ Rather, she turned to print and broadcast journalism that

14. Interview with Helen Creighton for Indiana University's Women in Folklore Oral History Project September 16, 1987. During this interview Creighton described Maud Karpeles as a "very, very good friend".

15. Academics such as Stith Thompson were reportedly enthusiastic supporters. Letter to Helen Creighton from Wayland Hand, 12 June 1982, PANS MG1 2791 #19. She sought their guidance on how to make a living from folklore collecting and on matters of interpretation. See letter to Helen Creighton from Stith Thompson, 23 March 1944, PANS MG1 2818, #132; and Letter to Helen Creighton from B. A. Botkin, 29 August 1944, PANS MG1 22810 #151.

16. See Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 130-132. Some of Creighton's references to the Folklore Institute, such as, "At Indiana University I'd studied Negro music" (*A Life in Folklore*, p. 133) may imply it provided more than an introductory course in folklore.

17. Her obituary reads that "she was educated at Halifax Ladies College and Indiana University", *Halifax Herald*, 13 December 1989.

18. Webb, p. 167.

19. For an early review of women's involvement in the academic study of folklore and the American Folklore Society, see Richard A. Reuss, "On Folklore and Women Folklorists", *Folklore Feminists Communication* 3.4 (1974), p. 4, 29-37.

20. Another indication of Creighton's marginal status within the academic folklore community is found in her relationship to the American Folklore Society. Reuss, p. 35, reports that she belonged to the society but was not closely linked to AFS activities.

offered more opportunities for women of her day and she used these media to promote her collected materials and to support herself. In his 1970s review of folklore studies in Maritime Canada, Richard Tallman linked the continuing presentation of Maritime folklore through popular culture channels and its near exclusion from university curriculum with Creighton's early efforts as popularizer.²¹

This may be just one of Creighton's legacies that can be linked both to her position "on the margins" of academic study and to gender. For example, these factors help to illuminate Creighton's claim on the Maritimes, and particularly Nova Scotia, as her product and her market. Creighton's status as unmarried daughter and primary care giver for aging parents and a mentally challenged sister meant that most of her collecting had to be done within easy driving distance of Dartmouth. The majority of her large collection originates from an area with a radius of only 25 miles and relies on a limited number of singers.²² Domestic responsibilities that kept her close to home placed Creighton in the double bind of needing her collecting for her albeit modest income, at the same time she was virtually unable to increase the size of her territory. Those who attempted to invade her delineated boundaries of Nova Scotia, particularly the Dartmouth area, were a threat to her livelihood and reputation which she could not tolerate. Concern with receiving acknowledgement and demarkation of boundaries are clearly illustrated in her correspondence concerning Laura Boulton, a National Film Board film maker who, Creighton learned, had plans to return at a later date to record some of *her* singers. She defended what she saw as her turf:

there are some things one just doesn't do...Professor Mackenzie discovered Pictou County and published a collection of songs from there. Miss Senior and I would never dream of invading that territory because our code does not allow it. Yet I was wearing myself out driving Mrs. Boulton around and all the time she was making plans to come back not in collaboration with me, but on her own. To my way of thinking that's not cricket.²³

Creighton's goals for the material she collected — other than that it net her enough profit to allow her to continue — were decidedly regionalist. Unlike most others who visited Atlantic Canada on brief collecting excursions, she was a Nova Scotian with deep roots.²⁴ While an outsider to the culture she collected and described because of gender and class, she was an insider because of her Nova Scotia birth, and part of the sensitivity and enthusiasm with which she spoke of performers and their material was pride in a provincial heritage that she shared.

21 . Tallman, p. 123.

22 . In 1944 B. A. Botkin suggested Creighton should increase her number of singers "for the sake of variety". Letter to Helen Creighton from B. A. Botkin, 21 April 1944, PANS MG1 2810 #151.

23 . Letter to Mr. McInnes from Helen Creighton, 11 October 1941, PANS MG1 2811 #162. See also Letter to Helen Creighton from Marius Barbeau, 29 September 1941, PANS MG1 2810 #74.

24 . See Tallman, p. 119 for a list of those folklorists who visited Atlantic Canada at this time.

She was dedicated to preserving what she saw as a vanishing expression: folksong. She hoped that when educated, Nova Scotians might find new uses for this ancient form. At times she went to great lengths to assert the identity of her material and she once travelled to Montreal to attend a National Ballet performance based on folksongs she collected because she feared that if she were not present the source material would be described as Canadian, rather than as Nova Scotian.²⁵ Ultimately Helen Creighton was very successful in her efforts to reintroduce folksong to residents of her province; one song she collected and helped to popularize, "Farewell to Nova Scotia", became a provincial anthem for Nova Scotians. As well, an annual folklore festival is now held in Creighton's memory.²⁶ However, her regionalist approach differed from that taken by the English-speaking academic folklorists at Memorial (as described by Laurel Doucette in her article in this volume) and emphasized Creighton's separateness.

Creighton's confinement within narrow boundaries influenced her very definition of the folklore. Dependence on nearby fishing communities not helped to establish the fisherman as a folk type. Her work closely identified fishing and seafaring with traditional culture in a way that agriculture, mining, or other resource based industries were not.²⁷ As Ian McKay points out, Creighton communicated to Nova Scotians clear messages that related to cultural continuity and imparted a positive cultural image linked with a former rural order that was tied to the sea. Her songs emphasized the popular notion of Nova Scotia's great age of sail; a past of wooden ships and iron men. Partly because of the limited population base on which she depended, and partly because of her own social position, as MacKay argues, Creighton presented a sanguine, homogenous view of history without suggestion of any kind of confrontational past. For example, she did not seek out labour songs, once writing bluntly to Edith Fowke in Ontario: "I'm afraid I don't share your sympathy with labour."²⁸ Her work helped to establish the fisherman as a provincial folk type for the Nova Scotian public.

Her concept of the "folk" was limited by ethnicity as well as geography. While she collected some materials from Gaelic speakers, Germans, African Nova Scotians and Micmacs, her emphasis was on those of British descent. It was with these performers she felt most comfortable and her forays — particularly into the latter two communities — were brief. While growing up she had very little contact with African Nova Scotians or with members of the Micmac community and when she tried to collect from them as an adult, she seems to have been at a loss. Her discomfort with these groups led her to use practices she usually avoided, such as offering performers money for their contributions.²⁹ Her

25 . Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 204.

26 . The Helen Creighton Folklore Festival of Dartmouth was established in 1990.

27 . McKay, p. 5.

28 . Letter to Edith Fowke from Helen Creighton, 29 March 1960, PANS MG1 2811 #162.

29 . Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 154-155.

description of interrupting a Micmac wake — with the priest's assistance — to collect songs is perhaps the most insensitive passage found anywhere in her accounts of collecting.³⁰ She spoke openly of feeling vulnerable when recording African Nova Scotians and of deciding not to collect their folklore.³¹

Creighton's experiences with Micmac and African Nova Scotian communities contrast to her usually very skilful fieldwork practice. She was clearly frightened by contexts where participants held little regard for her social construction of "lady." It was the acceptance of her "lady" persona that helped determine collecting exchanges — whether in a fish stage or in the back seat of her car — followed her "proper" social rules. She wrote reassuringly that "Fishermen have a particularly old-fashioned veneration for a lady, and once they put her on a pedestal, they prefer to keep her there"³² and that "most fishermen have definite ideas about what to sing for a lady".³³ By treating performers with distance and formality,³⁴ — and occasionally inviting some of them to her own home where she entertained them as members of a social elite to which they did not belong — she used gender and class differences to her advantage and was able to successfully guide interaction, maintain control and ensure her personal safety.

As Creighton's remarks concerning her foray into the African Nova Scotian community indicate, despite her best efforts, she sometimes felt vulnerable when collecting folklore. She commented once that male collectors had an easier time of it than female because they had access to more male-dominated contexts³⁵ yet, she did not rely, as did the Grimms in their early collecting for example, on the hired help of friends but sought out folksingers — who she had not met previously — in their own homes or work sites. Male-dominated spaces such as wharfs and fish stages were accustomed territory for her. "You will be able to visit the wharves with ease," wrote Catherine Gallagher, Creighton's most prolific female informant, inviting the collector to her new home.³⁶ Considering the restrictions and attitudes that limited women of her time, it is not surprising

30 . Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 147-148. She also described what may have been a betrayal of confidence in relation to a MicMac couple from whom she collected a witchcraft narrative. Apparently without their permission, she "mentioned this to a newspaper reporter who wrote it up". *A Life in Folklore*, p. 155.

31 . Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 134.

32 . Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 103.

33 . Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 162.

34 . She maintained a protective distance through different techniques, including her own dress — she always dressed up for an interview — and her use of formal titles. Years after she began to collect from Catherine Gallagher, they addressed each other as "Miss Creighton" and "Mrs. Gallagher." While the practice of using formal manner of address was certainly more common in the 1940s and 1950s than today, it is worth noting that the two were relatively close in age and that recently Gallagher's son referred to Creighton as his mother's best friend. Interview with Donald Gallagher, 18 August 1992.

35 . Interview with Helen Creighton, September 16, 1987.

36 . Letter to Helen Creighton from Catherine Gallagher, 25 May 1950, PANS MG1 2813 #2.

that Creighton was unable to traverse lines of race — few collectors and scholars in Canada have yet — but that she entered many foreign contexts; situations that a single woman of her class rarely, if ever, frequented.

Despite the obvious class differences Creighton felt from many of her singers, she never mirrored the condescension inherent in W. Roy MacKenzie's association of the ballad with what he termed, "low company".³⁷ In fact, she remarked that "a certain damage had been done" by Mackenzie's comment.³⁸ If somewhat patronizingly — "If I write possessively about my singers it is because I feel that way" — Creighton spoke with warmth and respect about the people she collected from.³⁹ She commented frequently on their patience and generosity in helping her get the songs down correctly. As well, she often expressed a sensitivity to community dynamics, describing how a singer's status rose following her visit or the satisfaction older singers gained from remembering and performing the songs she sought.⁴⁰

Creighton's less hierarchical methodology holds relevancy for current efforts. Her status as a "lone worker" allowed her to develop her own, sometimes innovative, field techniques. Negotiating new territory often meant treading carefully and strategies for manoeuvring around her vulnerability as a single woman alone included a direct approach: "Any young woman at that time going into a community alone would be suspect and the only sensible thing to do is to tell people exactly what you're there for." She continued, "I also made a point of making friends with a wife before going to her husband for songs, and you'd have her help, because she was usually proud of what her husband did. I find that men are very dependent on their wives to give them security and approval and encouragement."⁴¹ Creighton tried to make her visits memorable for the whole family⁴² as she wrote, "visits were occasions in this quiet life and an evening session always ended by a family treat of a fruit drink or a little cake or cookies to which I would contribute ice cream or something to make it festive".⁴³ This practice that involved the family as a whole made the recording an inclusive — rather than exclusive, one-on-one — encounter. As a woman she did not, and perhaps could not, adopt techniques commonly employed by her — mostly male — contemporaries. Creighton never offered singers alcohol nor did she often pay for songs. Rather, she invoked a reciprocal exchange, using photographs, food, or by bringing treats for the children of the family. Neither did she seek out bawdy

37 . W. Roy Mackenzie, *The Quest of the Ballad*, Princeton: University Press, 1919, p. 33.

38 . Helen Creighton, "W. Roy Mackenzie, Pioneer", *Newsletter of the Canadian Folk Music Society*, 2 (July 1967), p. 17.

39 . Helen Creighton, "Folk-Singers of Nova Scotia", *Canadian Forum*, 32:378 (July 1952), p. 86

40 . Creighton, "Folk-Singers of Nova Scotia", p. 86.

41 . Creighton, "Looking Back on a Satisfying Career," *Canadian Composer*, (April 1977), p. 28.

42 . Interview with Helen Creighton, September 27, 1987.

43 . Letter to Pauline Greenhill from Helen Creighton, 23 July 1987, PANS MG1 2817.

material and recounted one occasion when she erased an off colour song in order to regain control of a collecting situation.⁴⁴

Precisely because of her attention to nuances present during the collecting context, Creighton became recognized among American academic folklorists as a fine fieldworker. When Edward D. Ives organized a book of letters for Creighton in 1982, those like Wayland Hand, who had heard her lecture when he was student at Indiana, commented on her influence: "There is something else that you may not have remembered too well, but I remember it: your lecture in fieldwork. Many a time in class lectures I passed on to my students some of the practical advice which you gave at that time."⁴⁵ Warren E. Roberts echoed, "Your sensitive collecting and careful editing have made your works a model for folklorists in the United States."⁴⁶

A precursor to contemporary feminist practice of including oneself in one's fieldwork accounts, Creighton never claimed impartiality. From the beginning of her collecting in the 1930s Creighton seems to have understood that the collector represents an important component in the collecting situation and she included herself and her reactions in her written accounts. This practice may have stemmed from her journalistic use of the material for the inclusion of subjective detail made livelier copy. However, it contrasted to most academic writing that considered the collector an invisible force.⁴⁷ In the 1982 book of letters to Creighton, David Hufford commended "the manner in which you used your own reactions to the materials you were collecting while maintaining a thoroughly objective mode of presentation".⁴⁸

Ironically, in retrospect some strengths of Creighton's work stem from the same factors — geography, lack of institutional affiliation, and gender — placed her outside of the mainstream. Creighton's own reflections concerning her "life in the margins"⁴⁹ reflect both a loneliness and a freedom: "I was a very lone worker, there was no one else here who was very much interested. They knew I was doing something but they didn't know quite what, or why, or why it was important, and I didn't talk too much about it in the early days; I just forged ahead."⁵⁰

44 . Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p. 162. While this points to an obvious gap in her collection, Edward D. Ives had suggested that the prevalence of bawdy material in the northeastern folksong repertoire may have been previously overestimated. Interview with Edward D. Ives, February 13, 1992.

45 . Letter to Helen Creighton from Wayland Hand, 14 April 1982, PANS MG1 2791 #19.

46 . Letter to Helen Creighton from Warren E. Roberts, 21 April 1982, PANS MG1 2791 #19.

47 . At a time when objectivity was conceived as a possible goal for researchers, Tallman, p. 121, criticized Creighton's approach to folk belief for being what he described as parapsychological rather than folkloristic.

48 . Letter to Helen Creighton from David J. Hufford, 14 April 1982, PANS 2791 #19.

49 . For a discussion of research from the margins, see Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna, *Experience Research Social Change Methods from the Margins*, Toronto, Garamond, 1989.

50 . Helen Creighton, "Looking Back on a Satisfying Career", *Canadian Composer* (April 1977), p. 26.

That she was influenced but unrestrained by theoretical approaches — for example, she never endorsed functionalism — allowed her to cast a wider net when collecting than did many of her contemporaries.⁵¹ Creighton's failure to embrace the paradigm shift that moved English-speaking academic folklorists from text to context and performance contributed to her isolation from academically-trained colleagues but also allowed her freedom to include areas not usually documented. For example, her publications comprise an important source of information about women's roles — both as performers and supporters — in the folksong tradition of Nova Scotia, even though this was not an area of academic inquiry at the time she was collecting.⁵²

Although Creighton's publications reflect the selective principles of others in the field, her collecting was considerably more eclectic. Doreen Senior and others may have encouraged her to adopt standard academic classification that highlighted classical ballads, for example, but her unpublished material reflects a broad collecting sweep. While folksong remained the focus throughout her career, she believed "In collecting it seems nothing can be taken for granted, and it is best to take down everything available and weed out later."⁵³ Her approach remained multi-generic and in 1957, after years of folksong collecting, she was able to publish a book of supernatural legends. After *Bluenose Ghosts* and her 1968 compendium of folk belief, *Bluenose Magic*, she became as closely identified in the public mind with supernatural lore as folksong. This eclecticism won her praise from those such as Horace Beck, who wrote: "Unlike many of your contemporaries who concentrated on one aspect of folklore to the exclusion of others you had the foresight to take folklore as it came and thereby preserved what otherwise might have been lost."⁵⁴

Creighton's eclecticism, like other characteristics of her career and collecting corpus, was affected not only by her time, place, and class, but gender. While these influences sometimes prevent us from accepting unselfconsciously the work of any earlier collector as models — aspects of Creighton's notion of the folk, for example, are now outdated and no longer acceptable — they introduce means by which definitions are constructed and identify factors that moulded a

51. Maud Karpeles's very focused search for classical ballads in Newfoundland in 1932 provides a distinct contrast. See Maud Karpeles, *Folk Songs from Newfoundland*, London, Faber & Faber, 1971.

52. During fieldwork, Creighton often relied on female family members to extract the best possible performance from a male singer. For example, in *A Life in Folklore*, p. 144, she described a mother supporting her son as he sang, holding his arm and reminding him of words when he forgot them. As well, Creighton's song collections include many women singers. Katherine Gallagher, Creighton's primary female singer, sang many ballads for the collector and for a time was one of the singers Creighton most liked to call on when asked to do public performances or radio broadcasts.

53. Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, p.188.

54. Letter to Helen Creighton from Horace Beck, 26 May 1982, PANS MG1 2791 #19.

collector's view of self and her image of "folk" and "folklore", and affected her place within folklore studies. As the grip of functionalism that held the discipline tightly in its grasp for many years loosens, and we look to other frameworks, like feminism, to help us understand folk materials, we discover that aspects of Creighton's experience that have been disregarded as descriptive and regionalist, hold value. To borrow Edwin Ardener's well known concept,⁵⁵ academically trained folklorists too often muted those on the margins of folklore studies — usually women — who did not share the language of the academic centre. Now as we begin to appreciate the importance of listening to a variety of voices, including those we previously viewed as "other", we hear theory where earlier we thought there was none and words that promise to enrich our own fieldwork and study of folklore.

Books by Helen Creighton

- 1932 *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, Toronto, Dent. Rpt., New York, Dover, 1966.
- 1940 with Doreen Senior, *Twelve Folksongs from Nova Scotia*, London, Novello.
- 1950 with Doreen Senior, *Traditional Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, Toronto, Ryerson.
Folklore of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, National Museum Bull. 117. Rpt. Toronto, McGraw-Hill.
- 1957 *Bluenose Ghosts*, Toronto, Ryerson. Rpt. Toronto, McGraw-Hill, 1976.
- 1962 *Maritimes Folk Songs*, Toronto, Dent. Rpt. St. John's, Breakwater, 1979.
with Edward D. Ives, *Eight Folktales from Miramichi as Told by Wilmot MacDonald*, Orono, ME, *Northeast Folklore* 4, 3-70.
- 1964 with Calum MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, National Museum Bull. 198. Rpt. Ottawa, 1979.
- 1968 *Bluenose Magic*, Toronto, Ryerson.
- 1971 *Songs from Southern New Brunswick*, CCFCS, Ottawa, National Museum.
- 1975 *A Life in Folklore*, Toronto, McGraw-Hill.
- 1988 Ronald Labelle, ed., *La fleur du rosier: chansons folkloriques d'Acadie*, Hull, Museum of Civilization, 1988.

55. Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women", in Shirley Ardener, ed., *Perceiving Women*, London, Malaby, 1975, p. 1-28.