

Looking Back on Helen

Clary Croft

When I published *Helen Creighton: Canada's First Lady of Folklore* [Halifax: Nimbus, 1999], the dedication simply read: To Helen – with love from “her boy”. Over the last fifteen years of her life, Helen and I had developed a deep friendship and a loving mentor/student working relationship. She had a rogue’s gallery of her most favorite photographs on her dining room wall, where my picture held a prominent place. My wife, Sharon, and I were part of her extended family and for at least the last five years of her life she referred to me as “her boy” – perhaps the son she never had, perhaps her acknowledgment that I was, as she said, “carrying the torch” of her work. So, given the special bond we had between us, how could I be objective in my biography? How could I show Helen, flaws and all?

I could because she gave me permission to do so. When I began working on her collection I told her I was keeping a journal. She took that as the opportunity to begin confiding in me even more, sharing insights and explanations about her personal and professional life. And, most importantly, she kept her collection intact, donating it to the province of Nova Scotia without editing it, except for a very few truly personal things about her private relationships. She could have destroyed letters and diaries that showed she made mistakes, but she didn’t. Who of us would have the guts to bare our souls for the world to see? That’s one of the things I admire about her most. I also admired the way she cared passionately about her work and the informants who shared their lore and songs with her. When I first began working with her, and started to do my own field research, she gave me advice about informants I never forgot. She said, “Remember, Clary, you are the student; they are the teachers!”

Most folklorists seem to agree that Helen’s greatest strength was her work as a collector. She never considered herself an academic – her passion was in saving the material and, for the most part, she left the in-depth analysis up to others. But she discovered some truly wonderful material! She was an amazingly charming woman – part Edwardian lady, part mischievous sprite, part Mother confessor. Her formal demeanor didn’t seem to intimidate her informants. She was collecting in a time when people treated strangers in a more structured way. Yet she brought a passion that showed informants she

was truly interested in what they had to say and sing – often when their own family had lost interest. She was fun loving; she enjoyed telling and hearing a good joke; yet she took her informants’ beliefs concerning the supernatural seriously. That’s not to say she always believed. But because she had an empathy for their beliefs, informants seemed to gravitate to her and share experiences they had kept locked up for years. She was passionate about the songs and could often get a reluctant singer to sing forth when others had failed. As one of her elderly informants, Sydney Pete Boutilier, once told her, “You’ve a way with you, you’d bewitch the devil.” [Helen Creighton. *A Life in Folklore*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975]

Helen was a woman who got things done. She was fortunate in her early career to have the financial support and encouragement of her parents. However, contrary to popular misconception, she was not wealthy. She worked very hard to earn money to support herself, especially after the death of her parents, when her meager inheritance soon disappeared. She never considered her work in folklore a hobby – it was always her job!

Over the past few years, especially since Helen’s death, there have been some serious criticisms of her personal life and professional career. Most notably, is Ian McKay’s opinion of her as “an anti-modernist intellectual entrepreneur.” [Ian McKay, “‘He is More Picturesque in His Oilskins’: Helen Creighton and the Art of Being Nova Scotian”, *New Maritimes*, 12: 1 (September/October, 1993). See also: Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994)] While he is correct to point out, as many others have done, including Helen herself, that she avoided collecting bawdy and political material, I don’t think she did so purely from her own personal taste. She told me once that the bawdy songs often had the best melodies and catchiest words. But she also knew that a woman collecting such songs from men wouldn’t last long in a Maritime community without censure. The singers themselves, almost always, refused to offer to sing songs they thought unacceptable for mixed company. They were their own editors. Helen did have a fear of left-wing politics and avoided collecting songs she felt might

encourage such ideals. Too bad, we might have an even better body of labour and union songs had she not allowed her own personal biases to sway her choice in this genre. However, often the singers themselves felt uncomfortable in sharing such material. When Dennis Smith of Musquodoboit, on Nova Scotia's eastern shore, sang a variant of "The Honest Working Man" for Helen in 1943, he also asked that his name not be attached to the song "unless some Cape Bretoner heard it on the radio from New York and came and beat him up." [Diary, 7 August, 1943, Helen Creighton Fonds, NSARM Mg1 Volume 2830 #2]

Until I had completed my biography of Helen I had, for the most part, kept my opinions about her work to myself. Now, in the book's final chapter, I have addressed many of the criticisms aimed at her work. Some I agree with – others I feel are based on mis-information and ulterior agendas. But ultimately I go back to the value of Helen's

collection. She left so many observations – in her correspondence, research notes and diaries, that, whenever possible, I have been able to allow Helen to speak on her own behalf.

I believe we should judge Helen in the context in which she lived. Today's standards in folklore studies have changed radically since she helped pioneer the field. A new guard is already reexamining the way we look at folk and material culture today. But, in Helen's case, keep in mind that the material is there for us to examine, appraise, critique, study and, hopefully, enjoy. She knew her weaknesses and her strengths, and she brought her own personality to her collection. She no doubt missed some songs, but she nonetheless collected far more than perhaps any other individual collector in Canada. The fact that for evermore we will have to acknowledge her work when we speak of Canadian folklore is an amazing testimony to a passionate and dedicated collector.

The Helen Creighton Fonds at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia

[<http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/creighton/intro.asp>]

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Clary Croft, personal diary, 1 October 1986: "Today I begin work on the Helen Creighton Collection. It is perhaps the most important work I have been asked to do so far." Thus I began cataloguing the largest individual personal fonds [collection] housed at NSARM – the Nova Scotia Archives and Record Management [formerly, The Public Archives of Nova Scotia].

I had known Helen since 1974 when I telephoned her for advice on folk songs. She quickly became my mentor and a cherished, much loved friend. I was already an established performer and had experience working at various museums in Nova Scotia as well as working on term projects at the Public Archives since 1984. My new job, Contract Archivist, was sponsored by federal and provincial grants awarded, in part, to specifically develop an archival description for Helen Creighton's collection – most importantly, while the progenitor was still alive. What an amazing opportunity! I had to go through every file, image, recording and research note in Helen's personal folklore collection and meld that with the huge storehouse already deposited with the Archives. But the great luxury I had, to which few

archivists are privileged, is to have the collector right there to answer questions. Helen knew her collection inside out and most times offered insights and observations to which few people were privy. Out of that two year contract, along with our deep friendship and Helen's willingness to share "another one for your journal", I based my 1999 biography, *Helen Creighton: Canada's First Lady of Folklore* [Halifax: Nimbus, 1999].

Helen began depositing portions of her collection at PANS [the Public Archives of Nova Scotia] in the 1930s and by 1987 had completed the transfer of her personal collection from her home to this repository. After her death in 1989 some additional personal material came to PANS and, in 1995, more material was transferred from the estate of her nephew and executor, Jake Creighton.

Until recently, the only way to access Helen's fonds was by a visit to her archives. Fortunately, over the past two years, the Nova Scotia Archives and Record Management [with funding assistance from the Helen Creighton Folklore Society Grants-in-Aid Program] has developed a fine on-line site, including a special