

Edith Fowke: Reflections

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The 20th century saw folk music researchers and collectors in many parts of the world contributing to the collection and preservation of the music of their peoples. Such a person in Canada was Edith Fulton Fowke (1913 -1996).

Canada lost a national treasure in March of 1996 when Edith Fowke died. In the 1950s, when it was barely acceptable for women to work, Edith was out collecting stories and songs from the common folk of Ontario. In succeeding years she published some 30 books and numerous articles on both folklore and folk music.

Although Edith was not a musician, she was a social historian and a serious scholar who made a significant contribution to folklore, to the study and performance of traditional music, and to music education. I doubt that there is anyone in Canada performing traditional songs or teaching music who has not used songs from *Folksongs of Canada*, *Sally Go Round the Sun*, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folksongs*, *Singing Our History*, or *Canada's Story in Song*.

Shortly before her death, I had occasion to visit Edith several times. After her death, I interviewed both her husband, Frank Fowke, and her friend and collaborator, Richard Johnston. In this article I should like to reminisce about Edith and share excerpts of my interviews with Frank and Richard.

Dr. Richard Johnston (1917-1997) was a well known Canadian composer and Professor of Music, first at the University of Toronto, and later at the University of Calgary. Dr. Johnston's interest in folksongs was fostered by his contact with Edith. He co-authored several books with Edith Fowke, among them, *Folksongs of Canada* (1954). In my interview with Richard he describes their work together:

At first Edith knew all of the books [folksong and folklore books]. She was always a book person. She had a university degree. Edith was an extraordinarily bright woman -a member of Mensa. She had a huge library of this material. It was all over the place and she wanted to bring it together. In those days, remember [mid 1940s, 1950s] there were all sorts of folk singers on CBC too, such as Alan Mills, Burl Ives and Pete Seeger. These were all great friends of Edith's. There were all sorts of folk clubs in Toronto. I came to Toronto in 1947, and I met her in the fall of 1948, and we got going...When we first began to work together I did not know the Canadian material, and I did not have the Canadian published material to work with that Edith had. She had a big, big wonderful library.¹ We'd have a weekly or a bi-weekly meeting to talk about the make-up of the next book. She had lists of material—she made lots of lists. Some of the songs I knew, and some I didn't. She would give me the material. Sometimes we'd have a little bit of a battle. She wanted a particular song because of its social, labour, or historical implications. If it was really bad, junky music I would refuse it, and sometimes we had pretty serious arguments...

Edith was one of those people who had a focus. She was convinced that she could make a very real impact as an authority on Canadian folk music, and she certainly proved it.²

Dr. Johnston also describes taking Edith to meet the renowned ethnologist Marius Barbeau:

She was anxious to make contact with Marius Barbeau in Ottawa. She and I hopped in my car, and went to Ottawa for a weekend, and spent a very, very wonderful time with Barbeau. That happened two or three times. Later on, I got to know Barbeau very well, and that's when he and I organized, or I should say re-organized, the Canadian Folk Music Society. It had existed beforehand, but nothing really had happened. We got it going.³

Both Richard Johnston and Frank Fowke attest to the fact that Edith was a very independent, feisty lady. As co-author of *Folksongs of Canada*, Richard said that he and Edith needed each other. Edith was not a musician. She needed Richard to edit the music and to find a publisher. He said that he did not transcribe any of the music, as many of these songs were available from other sources and the songs that were actually from Edith's own collection had been transcribed for her by other

people. Although Richard and Edith became good friends in later years, the relationship was rather stormy at the beginning. Both of them were noted for having strong personalities and convictions.

Edith's husband, Frank Fowke, recalls that he met Edith in the mid-1930s at a dance at the University of Saskatchewan where they were both students, Edith in English, and Frank in Engineering. He took her to a few movies but he says she never encouraged him very much. It took him four years to persuade her to marry him. By that time, he had moved to Toronto where they settled. Now in his nineties, Frank Fowke still lives in Toronto. He is a grand raconteur and is happy to share memories about Edith.

I asked Frank how Edith became interested in folk music. Apparently, they had a record player and began collecting recordings, mostly of folk songs. When Edith found herself out of a job shortly after the war, she persuaded Harry Boyle at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) to let her present a program about folk music using her own recordings. This evolved into *Folk Song Time* which was on the air for a number of years.⁴ One summer in the early 1950s, she and Frank took a holiday in Nova Scotia and decided to make contact with Helen Creighton, the noted collector of Nova Scotia folksongs. They found her along the coast collecting folk music with a tape recorder. This was the first time Edith had seen a tape recorder used for such a purpose, and she became quite enthusiastic about the possibility of collecting songs herself with this type of equipment. The first tape recorder that Edith used was so heavy that she could not lift it, so Frank went with her on her collecting trips in the early years. In my interview with him he recounted several fascinating stories about those excursions, and about her encounters with various folk singers:

Later that fall, she decided to do some collecting. We tried a couple of other places but she was pretty sure that Peterborough would be the best place to collect songs. She thought we'd get more songs from Catholics than Protestants because John Knox and John Calvin frowned on singing folksongs. They thought singing should be to praise the Lord.

We knew a man who worked in the office of the local newspaper in Peterborough, but he couldn't help us any so we went to the local priest. We told him what we wanted. He put his head down, and gave us a long, hard look over the top of his glasses. I guess he decided that we were genuine, or at least harmless, so he gave us the names of several people who he thought could help us. One of them was a Mrs. Town who ran a general store in a town not far from Peterborough, and she was a big

help to us. Anyway, we'd go to one of these people, and ask them if they knew any of the lumber camp songs. That's the way we identified what we wanted.

Almost the first person we went to knew what kind of songs we were talking about, but he didn't sing them himself. But he said, "The man you want to see is my uncle, Martin Sullivan. He used to work in the lumber camps, and he knows all those old songs"...

[So] one singer would tell us of another singer. And we kept going that way. When Edith had her program, Folk Song Time, on the air, it was a one-hour program on Saturday afternoon about 10 o'clock. She got a letter from a woman from Swift Current, Saskatchewan, who was a nurse, and was nursing in a hospital out there. She told Edith about her father who lived in Hull, Quebec. She said he knew a lot of the old songs, and she should meet him, and get some of his songs. That summer we took my two-week holiday, and went up to Ottawa and Hull to look up O. J. Abbott. He was quite willing to sing for us. He was about 85 at that time, but he had a good strong voice, and he sang in tune. One thing about the singers is that they always sang unaccompanied. When they started a song they'd stop and think for a minute to get the pitch right and the first few words, then they'd start right off, right on the tune, and sing it right through...

I think we spent two afternoons with him, maybe more than that, and when the number of songs got up to around 70 or 80 he said, "Well, I'll give you a song for every year of my age." And he did. Edith went back a couple of times after that, and he gave her some more songs. I think it was about 120 songs she got from him altogether.⁵

Edith Fowke attended many folk festivals in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain, and became a personal friend of many of the singers. In this way she was able to hear, and to discover more variants of songs, as well as to make historical connections between songs heard in North America, and their older roots in the Celtic tradition. All of her books contain prodigious notes about the origins of the songs.

She held a strong conviction that people should hear songs as sung by her singers rather than simply seeing them in print. One of her projects was a series of books and recordings from her Ontario collection. During her travels in the United States she made a connection with Folkways Records. They produced a number of recordings from her collection including *Irish and British Songs from the Ottawa Valley* sung by O. J. Abbott (1961), *Lumbering Songs from the Ontario Shanties* (1961) and *Songs of the Great Lakes*. (1964). Later, Edith brought out two recordings in England, one of songs sung by LaRena Clark on Topic records

(1965) and the other, *Far Canadian Fields on Leader* (1975). Other printed collections followed: *Canada's Story in Song* (1960), *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario* (1965), *Lumbering Songs from the Northwest* (1970), *Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* (1973), and *Singing Our History* (1984).

Edith became interested in children's lore, and began collecting songs and singing games in her own neighbourhood, and then in a number of schools in Toronto. *Sally Go Round the Sun* (1969) and *Ring Around the Moon* (1977) include children's songs, singing and clapping games, ball-bouncing chants, and rhymes. These two books, as well as *Folk Songs of Canada*, and the *Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs*, are well known to many elementary school teachers in Canada.

In an article in *Ethnomusicology in Canada* (1990),⁶ Edith says that after 1973 she felt she had published enough books about folk songs, and was ready to turn her attention more to folklore. She continued to write articles and to teach. In 1971, Edith Fowke began to teach at York University where she continued to teach for 13 years. When she retired in 1984, she was made Professor Emeritus. Edith Fowke received honorary doctoral degrees from Brock, Trent, and Regina Universities, and was appointed a Member of the Order of Canada. She died on March 28, 1996, a month short of her 83rd birthday.

Before her death Edith Fowke donated her collection of 150 field recordings (representing some 2000 songs), 1000 books, and numerous papers to the University of Calgary. Her collection of tapes, records, correspondence and manuscripts is now in the Special Collections Branch of the MacKimmie Library. Her books are distributed throughout the Library. A computer search on the on-line catalogue using Fowke as the keyword will pull up records of the items (1084). Many of the books have a bookplate indicating the donation from the Fowke collection.

Edith's interest in leaving her collection to the University of Calgary began when she taught in the Kodály Summer Diploma Program in the early 1980s. Classes were delighted by this diminutive, white-haired lady always dressed in pink. The real Edith Fowke was hard to reconcile with the image of someone who had been collecting folksongs in the field on reel-to-reel tape from lumbermen in backwoods logging camps.

In the months before Edith died, I met with her on several occasions to arrange for the transport of her reel-to-reel tapes from Toronto to Calgary. Because of the fragile nature of the reels, as well as their historical value, we decided that I should take back as many as I could each time I flew from Toronto to Calgary. This gave me repeated opportunities to chat with Edith about the research possibilities inherent in the collection. Edith regretted that she was not a musician and had never been able to transcribe the songs she collected, but had to rely on others for this exacting work. Many of the songs she collected had never been transcribed and those that had been were not always musically accurate. Few were subjected to any kind of musical analysis. Edith was interested in having more thorough transcriptions and analyses undertaken, and expressed particular interest in having me work, along with László Vikár, on the songs of one of her most prolific informants, O. J. Abbott.

Edith had first met Dr. Vikár in 1978 at the Congress of The International Society for Music Education (ISME), in London, Ontario. At that time they discussed the possibility of his transcribing some of her, by that time, significant, as yet untranscribed, collection. Vikár, an internationally acknowledged authority on folk music transcription and analysis, and a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Folk Music Research Group, had spent much of his life, like Edith, collecting folk songs, but had spent even more time notating and analyzing the songs he collected. The latter are published in numerous volumes. Vikár had taught folk music courses in the summer program at the University of Calgary where Edith and I had also taught. Collaboration was both possible and logical. Two grants from the University of Calgary enabled the work to begin with Edith's input and blessing. Unfortunately, her death intervened before she could see the final results of our work.

One of my tasks in the summer of 1996, after Edith Fowke's death, was to arrange for an inventory of the books in her personal library before they could be moved to Calgary. The collection covered an entire wall of a room from floor to ceiling. Edith's friend, Skye Morrison, University of Calgary graduate student, Allison Lupton, and I spent a tiring, but delightful day listing the books by title. This was a mere listing, not a cataloguing. The biggest challenge was to keep from opening the cover of each book. Many of these books were rare collections of folksongs or folk tales. There were numerous articles, and complete sets of journals

dating back to the 1950s. We could have spent weeks happily browsing.

The graduate program at the University of Calgary has had a number of students whose research has been in the area of traditional music. This new acquisition from Edith Fowke will provide research possibilities for years to come.⁷ One master's thesis on an aspect of the Edith Fowke collection of field tapes at the MacKimmie Library has already been completed—*Towards an Understanding of Canadian Traditional Song Style Through Analysis of Descriptive Transcriptions Using Field Recordings Made by Edith Fowke in the Peterborough Area of Ontario During the Years 1957 to 1959*. (Sheri Herget, Master's Thesis, University of Calgary, 2001).

To the end, Edith Fowke was a delightful lady to visit. Although her body was failing, her mind, memory, and wit were razor sharp. Edith Fowke's interest in preserving our Canadian cultural heritage through the collection and dissemination of folk music and folklore is perpetuated through her gift to the University of Calgary, through the many people whose lives she touched, and through future publications based on her collection.

Notes

- 1 This collection of books was part of Edith Fowke's bequest to the University of Calgary
- 2 Johnston, R. Interview with Jeanette Panagapka at his home in Calgary, AB. Summer 1996.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 The University of Calgary *fonds*, accession file 404/87.10 contains transcripts of *Folk Song Time* dating from 1957 to 1964 (files 6.2 to 7.5).
- 5 Fowke, Frank. Interview with Jeanette Panagapka at his home in Toronto, ON. Summer 1996.
- 6 Fowke, Edith. 'Collecting and studying Canadian folk songs', *Ethnomusicology in Canada*, Toronto 1990.
- 7 Edith Fowke's research collection was bequeathed to the University of Calgary. However, the copyright is held by the Writers Union of Canada.

Jeanette Panagapka is a retired music teacher. She taught music and was a music consultant in the schools of Waterloo County for many years as well as teaching music education courses at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Calgary. She completed her master's degree and Kodály Diploma at the University of Calgary. Ms. Panagapka was founding president of the Kodály Society of Ontario (1984-1989), editor of *Alla Breve* (1993-1996) Kodály Society of Canada, and Secretary Treasurer of the International Kodály Society (1993-2001).

Fonds Edith Fowke

Edith Fowke's archival remains are not gathered together in a single location, which is unfortunate since it makes research into Edith's life and achievements more difficult than need have been the case. As far as I can tell so far, there are three places where material relating to Edith can be found: the Canadian Museum of Civilisation in Hull, Quebec; York University in Toronto; and the University of Calgary. At first glance, at least, by far the largest of these three collections is in Calgary, in the Special Collections section of the MacKimmie Library, housed at the very top of the Library tower. The University of Calgary also possesses Edith's personal book collection, but regrettably this has been integrated with the main University collection. It is however possible to obtain a print-out listing all the books donated by Edith and Frank Fowke.

Without going in person to Calgary it is possible to get some sense of what is in part of the fonds Fowke, although you cannot get a listing of everything. Use your web browser to reach the U. of C. website, and then locate Special Collections in the MacKimmie Library. This may seem easier said than done, but with persistence you will find it. Once there, click on the Richard Johnston Collection (the music archives). The Fowke collection is a sub-set of this.

You will find that fonds Fowke is divided into fifteen different accession numbers. The reason for this is that the archival material was donated at different times and by different people. Of these fifteen accessions, ten have so far been catalogued