



EDITH FOWKE (1913-96)

Many readers will have learned already that Edith Fowke died on March 28. Edith founded the *Journal* in 1973 and continued energetically to edit it until a few days before her death. Indeed, she worked on all but one of the articles in the present issue.

Edith's sense of continuity and history within the Society was unflagging. Year after year, her reports on the *Journal's* activities began at the organization's very beginning, with a statement of editorial mandate that opened as follows: "The Canadian Folk Music Society was established in 1956 by Dr. Marius Barbeau"

In many ways, Edith carried out for English-speaking Canada the rôle Barbeau had undertaken a generation earlier for the musical traditions of francophones and First Nations. A large photo of her dear late friend held a place of honour in her study. Just as her predecessor had responded vigorously throughout his career to the legacy of such scholars as Ernest Gagnon in Canada as well as Georges Doncieux and Julien Tiersot in France, Edith drew a lifetime's inspiration from such earlier researchers as Maud Karpeles and Helen Creighton.

Before Edith's substantial, five-decade career, little had been known of Ontario's English-language traditions by Canadians — except, to use one of her favourite expressions, by a few of the province's "ordinary people," especially those who perpetuated and adapted through living performance the treasured words and music that had, to use another phrase Edith cherished, "gone into tradition." By the end, she had collected, documented, annotated, and archived thousands of songs, games, stories, sayings . . . items in every category of Canada's traditional lore.

Edith's scholarly energy in advancing the cause of Canadian folklore quickly became legendary. She published a multitude of scholarly articles. She compiled, annotated, and edited many recordings and more than twenty books. At the time of her death, she was completing at least five more major projects.

The better part of Edith's most important publications comprised materials she herself had gathered first-hand. Edith's efforts as a collector of folklore involved close, sustained friendships with tradition bearers, many of whom she had discovered on her trips throughout the province. In her internationally respected writings and recordings, Edith celebrated these artists. For at least one source singer's very own recordings, she anonymously supplied scholarly information and advice, just as she helped promote wide awareness of several such performers through folk festivals and through her popular broadcasts on national radio and television.

For Edith, collecting Canada's lore could also involve canvassing her huge network of friends and colleagues, setting up a tape recorder in her East York neighbourhood, arranging a session in a Toronto elementary school, or even recollecting her own childhood in Saskatchewan. Animating all her activities of collecting and publishing Canadian folklore was her intention, as she so frequently and firmly put it, to "give back to the people" the heritage they had so generously shared with her.

Edith's concern for the Society was comprehensive and unstinting, as was her participation in its activities. Always a committed Board member, she never flinched from commenting clearly and forcefully on Society policy at its Annual General Meetings. Frequently a presenter at the Society's conferences, Edith was ever a cogent commentator on presentations she had witnessed. Her own books and recordings were a mainstay of the Society's *Mail Order Catalogue*, in which she took constant and vigilant interest, as she did in the *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin*. In recent years, she began to supply for the *Bulletin's* pages a regular series of favourite songs she herself had collected. Nonetheless, of all her exertions for the Society, the 24 years Edith spent working on the *Journal* formed the core of her activity, her labour of love.

With an M.A. from the University of Saskatchewan, where she had studied history and English, Edith brought her expertise in both areas to all aspects of the *Journal*. Understandably, she especially welcomed well researched articles about English-language traditions in Canada — particularly the beloved Child ballads, on which she continued to teach a course at York University until she was 80. However, as she emphasized in her foreword to the *Journal's* first volume, her intention from the start was for its contents to be "as varied as possible in the hope of appealing to both the folk music specialist and the non-specialist reader." She continued with the resolve: "We shall try to cover as many different aspects of Canadian folk music as we can." Thereupon, she proceeded to list, with justifiable pride, the very first issue's contents: "a representative cross-section of our ethnic groups: English, French, Ukrainian, Finnish, and Eskimo," and then described

the initial volume's coverage by means of a second itemization — so characteristically Canadian in its regional emphasis: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Newfoundland, and the Northwest Territories. Noting with regret that “French Canada is not represented,” she went on immediately to promise that “we will welcome French-Canadian articles for our next issue.”

Edith maintained a rather low profile within the *Journal's* pages. Her annual introductory notes were anonymously rendered, as were most of her many reviews and notices of books and recordings, her compilations of substantial, but unabashedly selective, reference lists, her accounts of awards and lives lived within the close-knit community of Canadian traditional music: all these generally were unsigned or quietly initialled “E.F.” By contrast, she carefully gave credit to others for such offerings. For these, her own contributions so often had served as a model, and her specific urgings as goad or encouragement.

In retrospect, it is remarkable how much of the *Journal's* space Edith gave over to sharing information within Canada's growing collectivity of traditional music researchers. Even in such a rare, signed contribution as her article, for an early *Journal* issue, on traditional songs she had collected in Manitoba, she credited four additional scholars: one for the music transcriptions and fully three others for annotations and commentary. Not formally trained in music, Edith continually sought out musical coverage and technical assistance for the *Journal*, as she did for the many song collections she published in monograph form or as practical anthologies. Similarly, she realized the promise made in the first issue by not only welcoming (as she had expressed it) but also actively soliciting and publishing submissions in French and on francophone topics, and persistently searched for and supported technical assistance in dealing with French-language materials.

On returning from conferences here and abroad, Edith would lament, with increasing annoyance in later years, that the presentations were becoming “too theoretical.” Originally an English literature specialist, Edith was a lifelong devotee of songs, singers, and one could even say (albeit with little in the way of official grammatical sanction),

“singings” — all these to be distinguished from such abstractions as song, singer, and singing as vague generalities. In much the same vein, her own writings preferred active verbs to passive, and, for a scholar, relatively few nouns, most of these concrete and particular. Nevertheless, her later writings are full of highly general insights (e.g., on the importance of women in singing traditions, of romantic narratives in North American traditional song, and of Irish singers in Canada, especially Ontario). But as sweeping, even breath-taking, as they are, Edith buttressed each such conclusion with a host of stubborn facts and careful reasoning.

As the *Journal's* editor, Edith tried to serve others' thoughts in a similarly direct and vivid manner. “Tried” is perhaps not quite the right word. Often within a few hours of receiving an article, even of great length, she already had tightened its prose considerably, frequently by as much as a third. A deletion here, a substitution or transposition there: such apparently effortless alterations time and again transformed the wordiest contributions into an easier, more concise style, and most important, freed up costly space for items that might have been delayed or never published at all. With comparable ease, Edith would go to her overflowing bookshelves (or more recently, her computer), returning moments later, triumphantly clutching a more precise reference or the answer to a troubling question of content.

In my experience, Edith preferred talking about friends, colleagues, bridge, mysteries, organizations, and projects she liked and admired to conversing about herself. She seldom mentioned her health, except to express vague but pointed annoyance with her recent illnesses, and almost never described her own strengths or weaknesses. As the single exception I can recall, she volunteered often in her later years an unprompted opinion that seems best to characterize her relationship to the *Journal*: in her own words, Edith was “a damn good editor!”

J.R.