

Women and Folklore

by Gillian Thomas

A Life in Folklore Helen Creighton.
Toronto: McGraw Hill-Ryerson, 1976.
Pp. 244.

Folklore of Canada Edith Fowke.
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.
Pp. 349.

The question is still often raised (by people thinking, presumably, of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead) as to why "all anthropologists" are women. This popular but erroneous impression derives from the fact that two of the best-known anthropologists have happened to be female and their work has tended to provoke speculation about how a woman can "manage" fieldwork in remote places. The same response occurs in relation to folklore, that

hearthside step-sister of both anthropology and literature.

At the present time the two foremost Canadian folklorists are women and both their careers and the substance of their work offer an opportunity for speculation about how a woman's career in such a field may proceed differently from that of a man.

In A Life in Folklore, Helen Creighton reveals a career which is unique both because of the writer's special personal qualities and because of the period during which she undertook her research. Like many scholars of an earlier generation her career seemed to her to happen almost by accident rather than as a result of planning or



HELEN CREIGHTON
RECORDING
NOVA SCOTIA
TRADITIONAL
SINGERS IN
PETPESWICK

ambition. Born into an established Nova Scotian family, but plagued by fragile physical health, Creighton describes a childhood that must resemble that of many other women born in Canada before the First World War. However, a vague interest in Maritime lore developed rapidly into a totally absorbing sense of purpose when, in 1928, a friend remarked that Roy MacKenzie's Sea Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia, a collection of material from the province's North Shore, suggested the possibility of a much more comprehensive study of the province's folksongs. Even though at that time she was uncertain as to what a "folk song" might be, this suggestion acted as the turning point in a career that has led to the collection of hundreds of traditional songs, to the publication of scholarly as well as popular books about Maritime lore and to the achievement of a unique place in the esteem and affection of Maritimers themselves.

From the point of view of anyone interested in the careers of women scholars, this "life in folklore" suggests some interesting observations. First, Creighton is an example of what is now known as the "unaffiliated scholar." Unlike the work of most more recent scholars, Helen Creighton's work has been funded, in part, by the National Museum of Canada, rather than supported by a university teaching position.

Secondly, the book raises interesting questions as to how the task of collection may differ somewhat depending on whether the folklorist is a man or a woman. In this area the folklorist's problems differ from those of the anthropologist in that the former usually has a single specific purpose while the latter's discipline involves a more complete absorption in the life of the community being studied. In short, the folklorist can remain herself while the anthropologist usually needs to participate to a much larger extent in the already existing roles in the community being studied. While this might seem to offer a more "open" situation for the folklorist, it is clear that there are many styles of social interaction easily available to the male folklorist which would present difficulties for a woman. The most obvious of these is the way in which male folklorists are often able to rely on male camaraderie which combines easily with providing liquor as a mode of eliciting material. Given the traditional attitudes towards women in most of the rural communities which the folklorist combs for traditional songs, this approach is likely to be counter-productive for a woman.

Interestingly enough, the "no liquor" rule is one which is conveyed quite strongly throughout Helen Creighton's accounts of collecting songs. While she suggests that her rationale for this has been the pragmatic one that drunk singers are usually muddled and forgetful, one also suspects that a further

reason is that the successful folklore collector is more or less compelled to act within a conventional framework of expected roles and that these are considerably more constraining for a woman than for a man.

Edith Fowke, herself a notable folksong collector, known particularly for her collection of songs from the lumber camps of Ontario as well as of children's lore, has now published Folklore of Canada. This is the first book to attempt a serious and comprehensive survey of the whole range of Canadian folklore materials much in the same way as Richard Dorson's classic Buying the Wind seeks to provide representative examples of the main areas of American folklore. Her career, like Helen Creighton's, began as that of the unaffiliated scholar collecting Ontario folk songs in the face of the then widely-held belief that no such songs existed. Later she was employed by the CBC to produce regular programmes about folk songs. She is now on the faculty of York University's English Department where she is responsible for courses in folklore and this affiliation indicates the way in which such work has become almost exclusively the "property" of universities.

Folklore of Canada reflects many of the

recent developments in folklore studies which involve a turning away from an exclusive interest in traditional songs and lore and the recognition that the study of folklore properly includes all material which is transmitted orally rather than by print or mechanical recording. Consequently this volume includes not only the kind of material which anyone with a casual interest in folklore would expect, but also an in-



EDITH FOWKE

teresting range of such items as autograph book rhymes, the macabre tales so relished by high school students and the ubiquitous "Newfie jokes."

It is evident that the book's publishers wanted to maintain the appearance of a popular rather than a scholarly book, and consequently all information referring to sources and classification is relegated to the last fifty pages of the book rather than appearing alongside the text. While this in no way damages the usefulness of the book for the serious student, it reveals something about the problems of Canadian scholarly publishing in this field. The Journal of American Folklore and other American publications have been for many years virtually the only outlets for serious examinations of Canadian folklore. In part, this may be identified as another way in which many aspects of Canadian cultural experience readily become American property. It is also the result of the reluctance of Canadian universities and publishers, until very recently, to give recognition to any serious study which does not fall within the very conventional limits of previously defined disciplines.

For the student of that other much-resented step-sister, Women's Studies, Folklore can offer important insights into the social and cultural roles of women. A few of the possibilities of this area were suggested in the January/March 1975 issue of Journal of Ameri-

can Folklore on "Women and Folklore." A particularly interesting article by Susan Kalčík revealed the way in which folklore methodology might be usefully applied to the story-telling which emerges in consciousness-raising groups.

Studies like Kalčík's do not fall within the definition of "scholarly activity" recognized through the departmental structure of most universities in this country, yet it may well be that the conservatism of universities and publishers in resisting legitimizing such areas of study is something of a disguised blessing. Even when one is employed by a university, to work in such fields as Women's Studies or Folklore places one intellectually, if not economically, in the role of the unaffiliated scholar. That role may in the end offer an opportunity to develop a scholarly integrity and independence which seems less and less possible within the approved limits of the narrowing world of the Canadian universities of the 1970's.