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[See table of contents](#)

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Articles

“ ‘Enough to charm the heart of a wheelbarrow and make a shovel dance’: Helen Creighton, Pioneer Collector”

Jane C. BECK

Helen Creighton was born with the caul on September 5, 1899 in Halifax, Nova Scotia—the sixth generation of her seafaring family, who had arrived in Halifax in 1749 from England. She grew up in a comfortable, genteel and “truly Christian” household. She attended boarding school at the Halifax Ladies College, did volunteer work during World War I and then went to the University of Toronto to be trained in social service. As she explains,

In the days when I grew up, it was assumed a girl would marry and set up her own home, probably with a maid to wait on her. If not, she would live with her parents and do volunteer work or enjoy the social round. The former hadn't happened, and the latter had never appealed to me as a way of life, so I looked now for a place where I could be useful.¹

In 1921 Helen Creighton traveled to Mexico to stay with her brother and it was after this experience that she first started writing. Soon she was doing it seriously. It was her search for a unique subject that led her to folklore collecting. When Henry Munroe showed her a copy of Dr. W. Roy Mackenzie's collection, *Sea Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*², she was fascinated and was quick to take up Munroe's suggestion that she “might do for the rest of the province what Dr. Mackenzie had done for the River John and Tatamagouche areas.”³

A few nights later, after a picnic on the beach at Eastern Pas-

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1. Helen Creighton. *A Life in Folklore*. Toronto, McGraw-Hill, Ryerson Ltd., 1975, p. 39.
 2. W. Roy Mackenzie. *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1928.
 3. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 49.

sage, she struck up a conversation with a villager, Mike Matthews, "in that easy way one does in the country"⁴ and asked about treasure. Matthews' response and his comment, "They'll tell you stories and sing you songs as well"⁵ was all the encouragement Creighton needed to ask where to go. In a sense Matthews was her bridge to the community of Hartlan's Point, as he told her to go see the Hartlans and then paved the way for her by preparing them for her arrival. This was to be her first experience in "this setting so near home, yet so remote. It was like stepping into a different world. . ."⁶

Over fifty years later Creighton is still working and has amassed a major collection of folklore from the Canadian Maritimes with an emphasis on her native province of Nova Scotia. In order to fully appreciate the value of her accomplishment it is important to look at her work as a whole and place it in the wider context of the discipline of folklore in general.

As a field of study folklore has burgeoned in the last half century. Universities have comprehensive programmes which grant the Ph.D. degree and folklorists are being employed not only by academic institutions but by state and local groups, by hospitals and even by industrial firms.

The fact remains, however, that the discipline of folklore is dependent on field research and as the profession grows there has been more and more emphasis placed on learning good field techniques. Twenty years ago, when I was in graduate school, there was one seminar course on fieldwork, one main text, and a lot of armchair deliberation. Today the courses on collecting have multiplied and few students finish their studies without substantial first-hand experience in the field. This training may be done individually or as part of a team. Techniques have been refined, but there is always one major problem: the human element—and with this very large consideration comes a host of unpredictables. Every field situation is different and the only way a scholar can truly assess a colleague's results is by understanding the human contingencies as well as the techniques used.

Theories of folklore and collecting come into and go out of fashion. At one time the text was thought to be all important. Now the emphasis is behavioral, with the focus on the performances of folklore within a cultural context. If today's scholars are not abreast of the latest theories and their collecting does not reflect these the-

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

ories in rigorous analysis of the material, their work is apt to be dismissed.

But it must be remembered that theories cannot be formed, programmes cannot be developed until fieldwork has been done. Here we owe a debt to collectors who went before us and amassed a considerable body of material. The problem is, how do we evaluate it? How was it collected? What were the personal considerations and attitudes that played so large a part in the collection? A few of the early fieldworkers have left extensive diaries but many others have bequeathed little information to enlighten those who follow as to the role of the human element in their research.

Helen Creighton has left us an autobiography and a number of articles and books which give later students an insight into how she collected her material and attitudes concerning it. With the aid of these insights her work becomes even more important.

It was the Hartlans who first schooled Creighton in folklore and led her to understand how much their beliefs were an integral part of their lives. As she explained later, "The telling of ghost stories was not a part of my early experience in life."⁷ But it was "Through the tutelage of the Hartlan men I understood for the first time the meaning of a strange event in my own life. . ."⁸ One night while she was playing cards with members of her family, they were interrupted by a loud knocking. There was no one at the door and all in the room were mystified by it. "I forgot about it until the Hartlans took on my education. Then I realized that what we had heard were the three death knocks."⁹ In fact, her sister-in-law died shortly after the event.

Although Helen Creighton had lived all her life in Nova Scotia and shared the same physical environment as the fishermen, her upbringing had placed her in a world apart. However, because of her ethnic and seafaring background she was still very close to the nub of the fishermen's life. Further, the Creighton name was known and respected among her early informants and as she worked her fame spread before her, making her informants eager to oblige.

Although she knew little of the fisherman's way of life, once she crossed over into his world she was anxious to learn. She listened carefully and realized the significance of being born with the caul (an individual born with the caul can never be drowned and will usually have second sight, the ability to "see things"). Helen Creighton feels

7. Helen Creighton, *Bluenose Ghosts*. Toronto, The Ryerson Press, 1957, p. v.

8. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

9. *Ibid.*

she has this ability and gives a number of examples in her autobiography and in her introduction to *Bluenose Ghosts* — particularly of “forerunners” but also of an experience in March 1956 which involved one of her informants, Ben Henneberry, who by that time had been dead for five years. She was in the middle of a narration for a special broadcast of folksongs. A number of the songs being used were those that had first been sung to her by Ben Henneberry. Suddenly, half way through her performance, Creighton “began to feel a little shaky. Then to my great astonishment Ben Henneberry was with me. I neither saw nor heard him, but I received a message and knew it was from him. It said, ‘You’re doing very well. Just keep it up.’ . . . I was all right immediately and the broadcast proceeded with no one else realizing what had taken place.”¹⁰

While she accepted a belief in ghosts, Creighton was not willing to believe in witchcraft. She proclaimed this one day during a collecting session and found that her statement served as a challenge. Her informants explained “that there are witches in the Bible and that it is written ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’.”¹¹ Of course examples followed.

Thus, unlike modern folklorists, Creighton learned her folklore from the folk. The field was her university. For the rest of her life she made forays into the fisherman’s world, coming to accept some of his beliefs, in some cases identifying with him, but always returning to her own world which had shaped her life view.

This life view, rooted deeply in her childhood and family heritage, influenced her reactions to situations and affected how she proceeded with her fieldwork. She was always very much the lady, believing “that a collector should never dress down while working; that informants are flattered when you arrive clean and neatly dressed and are therefore more prone to make friends.”¹² She believed that the fishermen had “an old-fashioned veneration for a lady, and once they put her on a pedestal, they prefer to keep her there.”¹³ She did not like liquor and stated emphatically, “if a young woman couldn’t get a man to sing without bribing him with drink she wasn’t worth her salt. . . . The secret is to make your singer want to sing.”¹⁴ She kept clear—or tried to—of any situations that involved intoxicating

10. *Ibid.*, p. x.

11. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 163.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

beverages, and when urged to go to Devil's Island at Christmas time for "that's when you'd get the songs. We dance in the lighthouse from Christmas to New Year," she had no taste for it. "I sensed there would be drinking which would mean muddled thinking and songs begun but never finished."¹⁵

Even without liquor, Creighton didn't seem to have much trouble in encouraging her singers to sing—even reluctant ones. In the words of one of the sayings she collected, she was "enough to charm the heart of a wheelbarrow and make a shovel dance."¹⁶ When she asked John Roast "to sing he said he wouldn't," but they "sat down and talked anyway. . . ." Creighton encouraged, " 'and when you sing this one,' and before he realized it he fell into the song quite naturally." This man, although from a singing family, was "supposed not to sing," but Creighton was successful in getting two songs out of him.¹⁷

Another man who was reluctant to sing because he had had a paralytic stroke, was coaxed and encouraged verbally and by listening to the recordings of his friends. Finally he sang one verse, then finished the song and sang two more. "Laughing for the first time in months he said, 'You've got a way with you, you'd bewitch the devil'."¹⁸

Although Creighton obviously used her feminine wiles to encourage and charm her male informants she never flirted with them. "I developed a friendly attitude and was so intent upon my quest that there was no doubt what I was there for."¹⁹ Another technique was to use the prefix "Mr."

Walter (Roast) was a bachelor about my own age so, to be sure he didn't get any ideas, I always addressed him as Mr. Roast — and his cousin John as well. People were not as free with first names as they are now. One day Walter protested, and I asked him why he didn't like it. He said, "It makes me too high feelin'." He never guessed the real purpose but it worked and we were excellent friends.²⁰

As so often happens when a folklorist goes into the field, relationships are made and nurtured and the folklorist feels a responsibility and desire to somehow repay those people who have given

15. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

so willingly of themselves. After a week of strenuous collecting and living on Devil's Island, Helen Creighton "wanted to do something in return, something personal they would have to remember" for the islanders who had been so willing to share and for the heartwarming kindnesses they had shown her. After thinking long and hard and consulting with her parents, "We invited six of them for evening dinner and we did it up in style."²¹ Once more the two worlds became one for a moment.

From the start Creighton sought out her informants by word of mouth, concentrating on the secluded farms and fishing villages. As she wrote in the introduction to her first book, *Songs and Ballads of Nova Scotia*, "Collecting can never be done in any hurry. . . ."²² When it was necessary, as on Devil's Island, she went and lived with her informants. Because Nova Scotia is a relatively small area she could also return again and again to her best informants. She tells us that her singers were mostly fishermen, farmers, and lumbermen and that generally it was the men who sang, with a "scattering few" women.²³ Although she claims women are often better informants than men, especially about "home remedies and early customs,"²⁴ it was only in Pubnico that she collected all her material from women.²⁵

As she was most interested in traditional songs, like so many of the early collectors, she asked for "old songs" and quickly learned the trick of triggering memories by mentioning ballad clichés. Did the singer know a "song about the milk white steed"? or one that began "As I walked out one May morning"?²⁶ But unlike some of her contemporaries she was not dazzled by these gems alone, nor did she reject or dismiss other material she was given. She believed that "In collecting. . . nothing can be taken for granted, and it is best to take down everything available and weed out later."²⁷ She kept extensive field notes in the form of a diary (something that all fieldworkers are taught to do today) and in 1947, when she began working for the National Museum of Canada "to collect folklore," she maintained "an index file of the place and date of each item of folklore and the racial

21. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

22. Helen Creighton, *Songs and Ballads of Nova Scotia*. Toronto, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1932, p. x.

23. Helen Creighton, *Maritime Folk Songs*. Toronto, The Ryerson Press, 1961, p. v.

24. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 151.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

background of each informant."²⁸

As she later wrote,

In the winter each song must be typewritten and checked with its tape recording for accuracy, because even when very familiar with dialects one may have difficulty in making out occasional words. . . Every story, superstition, expression, old saying, old remedy, and so forth is put on its own index card. There are duplicate cards, one for the National Museum, the other for my own files.²⁹

Creighton was a good observer and was quick to note the function of songs to lighten work:

Dear Mrs. Gallagher! . . . That Saturday afternoon her floor had to be scrubbed so her house would be in order for possible Sunday visitors. She wanted to sing, and then did the thing most natural to her which was to sing while she scrubbed. This was her songs' function in her life anyway, for they accompanied her housework.³⁰

She notes that Walter Roast sang as he ploughed,³¹ Ben Henneberry as he fished³² and Jack Turple to "sing" his debtors.³³ (He made up songs about them to shame them into paying their debts.) Angus the Ridge always played his pipes when his neighbor gathered his hay "to lighten his neighbour's labour"³⁴ and the Cape Breton Scots would gather to sing and shrink the wet cloth:

They would gather at one another's homes and sit around a table. Songs were familiar, but the leader who sang the verses would often make them up as he went along; then all would join in the chorus much as sailors did in chanty singing. As they sang to a strongly marked rhythm they would thump the set cloth on the table and pass it from one to another until it was dry. It demanded great energy, but work done joyously is never too strenuous, and they knew that supper and a dance would follow.³⁵

She comments on the style of many of her singers. "Mr. Smith sang leaning forward, knees wide apart, whittling a piece of wood with a jackknife and, in the custom of old-timers, he spoke the last two or three words, sometimes with great emphasis, to show that the song was finished. . . he embellished his tunes with grace notes and em-

28. Helen Creighton, "Fiddles, Folk-Songs and Fishermen's Yarns." *Canadian Geographic Journal* 51/6: (1955), 212.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

30. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 104.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Maritime Folk Songs*, p. 109.

34. *A Life in Folklore*. p. 114.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 144-45.

broideries which varied with his state of mind and mood."³⁶ Or Angelo Dornan, "Like his father he sings slightly bent, usually twiddling a stick in hands between his knees, and always as a sort of ritual wearing a clean shirt."³⁷ And there was Nathan Hatt "whose song characters were such constant companions that he made up his own stories about them as though he knew them personally"³⁸ and Mrs. Duncan of Woodside who "cherished" her songs "as another might her needlework or piece of precious china. She sang slowly and deliberately and often injected a little joke."³⁹

She noted techniques for remembering songs: Stanley Williams "had sung readily enough but stopped suddenly and said, 'No more songs, I'm going to have a shave,' and off he went to the kitchen where I could hear him stropping his razor. He had sung himself out for the moment but didn't want to admit it. The stropping refreshed his memory and he called out, 'Have you got this one?'"⁴⁰

Helen Creighton respected her singers. "A good folk singer. . . is a great artist in his way and has worked out his own technique for commanding attention."⁴¹ She came to know her best singers well for she would return again and again. Some of these men had repertoires of over one hundred songs and their association continued over years. As she shrewdly notes, ". . . a singer will laugh with you only when he feels he knows you well. His sad songs come first."⁴² Other informants she only met once, as she was concentrating on a variety of material. "I had been told that the boatman who took me across the river was a good informant, so I went with him to the shop where he repairs boats and does other carpentry, and spent most of the afternoon talking to the men working there. They told me tall stories, treasure stories, and ghost stories, and recalled what riddles they could."⁴³ Sometimes collecting conditions were less than ideal. "I was taken first to see two men who were building a house and who stopped long enough to tell me my first Paul Bunyan yarn. Coming upon them unexpectedly they could not recall many stories, but they were waiting for me on my return and called down a tall story from

36. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

37. *Maritime Folk Songs*, p. 47.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

39. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 93.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

41. *Maritime Folk Songs*, p. v.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

43. Helen Creighton, *Folklore of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia*. National Museum of Canada, Bulletin No. 117, Ottawa, 1950, p. 115.

the roof where they happened to be working at that moment.”⁴⁴

In her first collecting days Helen Creighton took all the words of the songs down by hand and the tunes down by the aid of a portable hand organ. Her days were long and strenuous—something that modern collectors with tape recorders are hard pressed to imagine. She describes one such situation:

In the morning, Mr. Ben (Henneberry). . . would sing while mending his nets, and I would sit in the door of his fishhouse with the melodeon at my side. It had a wooden case with leather handle, but was too heavy to carry, so I pushed it in the Faulkner’s wheelbarrow. In the afternoon the children sang their fathers’ songs. . . . Later, at his home, Mr. Ben would sing for another hour songs learned when fishing off Newfoundland’s banks, or from sailors shipwrecked on their island. . . .

After the briefest rest, I would hear the latch lift as the first evening visitor arrived. Mr. Ben would come at seven, and as long as he was there nobody would sing because he had taught them most of the songs they knew, so they felt the songs were his. . . . Mr. Ben would leave soon after nine. . . . The younger men would sing then and it was usually three a.m. before the last one left. . . . Added to the transcription of songs in a room jammed with people, it was necessary to keep the singer interested so he wouldn’t weary of repeating a phrase over and over again.⁴⁵

By 1932 she had met Doreen Senior, a member of the English Folk Song and Dance Society. Senior had the ability to note the songs as she heard them and for the next few summers they made collecting trips together. But as time and technology moved forward Creighton used a dictaphone and then a disc recorder. The latter was a dubious pleasure—bulky and heavy, it was not easy to move from place to place. It was not until 1949 that she used her first tape recorder.

Until 1942 Helen Creighton did her work with no academic affiliation. She had taken Roy Mackenzie’s and Cecil Sharp’s work as models, calling her automobile “Cecil in honour of the great English collector Cecil Sharp, whose work we tried to emulate.”⁴⁶ She had read widely in the available folk song literature and had completed two books, the first, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia* in 1932, which followed the Mackenzie pattern of comparative notes for each song and included one hundred traditional British songs and fifty indigenous songs. The second, *Twelve Folksongs from Nova Scotia*⁴⁷

44. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

45. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 59-60.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

47. Helen Creighton with Doreen Senior, *Twelve Folksongs from Nova Scotia*. London, Novello & Co. Ltd., 1940.

with Doreen Senior, contained the pianoforte accompaniments of each song.

In the summer of 1942, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, Creighton was sent to the Institute of Folklore held at Indiana University and it was here that she came in contact with such folklore scholars as Stith Thompson and Herbert Halpert. Her courses and readings that summer expanded her horizons with two distinct results.

One was a six week collecting trip in Lunenburg County where she concentrated on gathering the folklore of an area populated largely by one distinct ethnic group—people of German heritage. She drove around with the school inspector. She had done this before in Guysborough and he had proved a good bridge to the community; “since he had to visit every part of the county. . . I met people easily.”⁴⁸ Over the six week period she stayed with two families. As she said, “I did double collecting every day because at night we would go over the notes taken during the day, and those would remind them (her hosts) of similar items.”⁴⁹

Her *Folklore of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia* captures the traditions of the region with an emphasis—which was the scholarly fashion of the times—on the collectanea with comparative notes to similar items of other areas and minimal emphasis on the informant or contextual material. Stith Thompson worked closely with her and made suggestions on the book’s organization. When it came out in 1950, Douglas Leechman of the National Museum of Canada wrote “She has been most successful in establishing the rapport necessary to induce people to talk about matters which they usually reserve for the most intimate discussions among their closest circle of friends, and she is to be congratulated on a successful piece of fieldwork.”⁵⁰

Another result of her studies at Indiana was a new awareness of “Negro music” and Herbert Halpert’s encouragement to include the songs of Nova Scotia blacks in her collection.⁵¹ There was a black population of some 15,000 in the Halifax area so Creighton began a search for black singers. She was less successful here than in any other community. She had little understanding of black culture and she

48. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 116.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

50. Douglas Leechman “Review of *Folklore of Lunenburg County*” *Journal of American Folklore*, 63 (1950), 253.

51. Helen Creighton, “Collecting Songs of Nova Scotia Blacks”. *Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert*, St. John’s, Newfoundland, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980, p. 137.

seems to have met with suspicion and distrust that she had not before experienced. As she wrote later, "These people seem more loath to talk about their superstitions than any others."⁵² This experience once again underscores the importance of rapport and understanding between collector and community. Just because one is successful in one community, it does not follow that one will be successful in every community.

Despite her inability to penetrate the black community, Creighton did manage to collect forty-nine songs from her chief informant, William Riley, and a number of singing games from "The Home for Coloured Children".⁵³

As every collector knows, there are moments of irritation, disappointment, frustration, even embarrassment or discomfort. How many fieldworkers have been told, "You should have been here last night; we had a great sing"⁵⁴ or have gone to visit a renowned singer who had "got religion" and will now only sing hymns.⁵⁵ "Many times we climbed steep hills only to find possible singers absent."⁵⁶

A collector can often get involved in sticky situations without fully understanding their ramifications. Helen Creighton consulted the priest, Father Rankin, (in this case a bridge to the Indian community of Nyanza) about recording at a funeral:

He thought recording a fine idea and took us to the home of the deceased where a woman said she knew lots of stories but didn't feel like telling them then, though she had no objection to others doing so. . . . We assembled our equipment in the yard and everybody crowded around. Then Father Rankin selected a young man to sing, and then another. After a while I noticed a restiveness among the other young men which grew into open resentment. Then one, looking angry, said "This is the last one, see. We want to get on with our business."

Creighton learned too late that "it was their custom to spend all morning and early afternoon getting money from the mourners to pay for the funeral. While recording was going on the people wouldn't give, and they were afraid they wouldn't get their money."⁵⁷

But Helen Creighton had by far fewer setbacks than she had successes. She successfully collected songs and other genres of folklore not only in English but in Gaelic and in French. She tried to make a

52. "Fiddlers, Folk-Songs and Fishermen's yarns", p. 214.

53. "Collecting Songs of Nova Scotia Blacks", p. 143.

54. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 96.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

representative collection and modeled her scholarship on techniques emphasized in the forties and fifties. But she did a great deal more than that and must stand as a Canadian model for a relatively new species of folklorist in the United States, one who works in "the public sector". In the last ten years their ranks have swelled, their chief duties being to preserve and share folk traditions with the general public—reintroducing these traditions into public programming, into schools, and into everyday lives.

The first and most critical phase of this work involves good collecting procedures so that the folklorist knows and understands what traditions, customs and beliefs are practiced and who are the storytellers, the singers, and the traditional artists and craftsmen in the region. Without this information any public sector program is worthless and struggles from its inception. The next major step is making these findings available, useful, and enjoyable to the public in various ways. In both of these roles Helen Creighton was astonishingly successful.

Creighton has published only a small percentage of what she has gleaned. Six volumes of songs⁵⁸ do not represent a quarter of her material. Much of the supernatural lore that she gathered appeared in *Bluenose Ghosts*, which became a best seller and has gone through ten printings, and a second volume that Wayland Hand encouraged her to bring out, *Bluenose Magic*,⁵⁹ a compendium of Nova Scotian beliefs and superstitions that further explored the realm of the supernatural. Her books have not only preserved but generated more material. Readers wrote numerous letters filled with information—and leads. Through articles, lectures, and books, Helen Creighton has provided the world several windows to view the traditional life of the Maritime Provinces. But she used more than the accepted scholarly conventions.

As early as 1938 she was involved in bringing some of the traditional singers she had discovered to radio. She met Gladstone Murray, head of the CBC, and broached the idea for a series. Her own comment to Murray, "I've been collecting folk songs for ten years and

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58. *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, with Doreen Senior; *Twelve Folksongs from Nova Scotia*, with Doreen Senior; *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*. Toronto, The Ryerson Press, 1950; *Maritime Folk Songs*. Toronto, The Ryerson Press, 1961; with Calvin MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 198, Ottawa, 1964; *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick*, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, 1971.
59. Helen Creighton, *Bluenose Magic: Popular Beliefs and Superstitions in Nova Scotia*. Toronto, McGraw Hill, Ryerson Ltd., 1968.

am only now beginning to feel that I know enough to broadcast about them",⁶⁰ is something all folklorists working in the public sector should note. It is always healthier to select from the best.

Creighton's first radio series of ten programs on folksongs — using the singers from whom she had originally collected the songs— was so successful that it was followed by a second series of ten. There were a number of results from these radio programmes. "For most listeners it was a revelation. . . ."⁶¹ "Each singer received ten dollars a broadcast, which in 1938 wasn't bad. . . ."⁶² And it gave the singers themselves a new kind of status. Walter Roast had an inferiority complex mostly due to the fact that he had "an arm withered from polio and the fact that he had not yet found a wife." "His friends used to tease him about his singing" until Helen Creighton showed a continued interest in his songs. "He had suddenly become important in the community. . . ."⁶³ Singing on the CBC heightened his prestige. Thus Helen Creighton was already confronting two issues that are primary concerns today: 1) payment of the informant and, with this, a desire to keep him from being exploited; and 2) the change in status a folklorist's attention can afford the informant—a change which may not always be desirable to the individual.

This indefatigable collector has been successful in using every media form to bring her material to both public attention and enjoyment. In 1956 a film, "Marine Highway", was made for the Nova Scotian government and again included a representation of some of the singers she had discovered. "Songs of Nova Scotia" followed with an even more extensive treatment. She has appeared on television and documentaries have been produced based on her work. The first was "Land of the Old Songs". Next came "Lady of the Legends", based on her book, *Bluenose Ghosts*, one again with many of the tales told by the original narrators. Folkways Records produced two albums from her work: "Maritime Folksongs" and "Folk Music from Nova Scotia".

Creighton has also led the way in festivals. As early as 1957 she was involved, as a judge, in the Miramichi Folk Song Festival. This festival, begun by Louise Manny, "must have been the truest folk festival on the continent."⁶⁴ Strict criteria were maintained so that songs

60. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 110

61. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Helen Creighton, "Canada's Maritime Provinces: An Ethnomusicological Survey (Personal Observations and Recollections)", *Ethnomusicology* 16, (1972), 408.

which were performed were truly folk songs, sung by folk singers. "While my singers were mainly fishermen, those who sang for Dr. Manny were lumbermen and they were the chief contributors to her festivals."⁶⁵ When Pete Seeger wanted to attend he was told that he was welcome to come but could not take part.⁶⁶

Creighton has always been interested in children and before she turned to collecting folklore she had written a book-length story "The Tale of the Golliwogs"⁶⁷ which she read on her 1926 Halifax radio program as "Aunt Helen". Children's songs had been well-represented in her collection and it was only natural that she should become involved in working with educational groups— another important facet of her life of the folklorist involved in the public sector. She worked closely with Sister Fleurette Sweeney in producing a selection of children's songs from her collection to be incorporated into the curriculum that was being prepared by the Music Department of the Halifax City School Board.⁶⁸

Today, after a career of more than half a century, Helen Creighton is still working, still bringing out new material in book form, (she is putting together a volume of Acadian songs from Nova Scotia) and is still working on her own papers. To her all folklorists owe a big debt. She was certainly in the right place at the right time and has preserved a vast amount of folk material to be perused, enjoyed and made use of by later generations. She was on Devil's Island and collected material there before it became deserted and she worked in the fishing village of Duncan's Cove before it became an artist's colony.

Further, through her books (and there have been eleven) and articles, her lectures, records, films and radio programmes she has made people aware of the rich traditional heritage of Nova Scotia most particularly, but of all the Maritime Provinces.⁶⁹ Although her abiding interest was folk songs in English, which she defends ("because in other parts of Canada practically all collecting has been of songs in other tongues such as French, Indian, and Eskimo. I believe English folk songs can be used by a greater number of people. . ."⁷⁰), she collected songs in Gaelic, French and Micmac. But more significantly she

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. *A Life in Folklore*, p. 44.

68. "Canada's Maritime Provinces: An Ethnomusicological Survey", p. 407.

69. *Maritime Folk Songs; Folksongs of Southern New Brunswick*; and with Edward Ives, "Eight Folktales from Miramichi", *Northeast Folklore* IV, 1962.

70. "Fiddles, Folk-Songs and Fishermen's Yarns", p. 270.

noted down many legends, tales, superstitions, beliefs, remedies, games, riddles, foodways, folk speech, nicknames and descriptive elements of folklife. These were in the days when the focus was on the text, the individual item of folklore. But even so she collected material on how and when a singer sang his song and insights into the very fabric of folk culture. For example her discussion of “booeying”:

It is important because it describes the first step in the life of a fisherman at Victoria Beach, Nova Scotia. A boy will begin to fish at the age of ten, or even younger. He will take a fishhook, attach the hook to a snood, fasten the snood to a stick and weigh the stick down with a stone to make a buoy. . . .With a piece of herring as bait, he will then row out in a boat to a place near the shore and put his line in the water. Presently a small pollock will bite and be hauled in. This will be eaten at home because pollock caught in this way are too small to sell. This is “booeying”. The word appears to be a new one because the older men never used it although they, too, fished in the manner described.⁷¹

Perhaps there are many questions a later scholar trained in the newest methods might like to ask, information from another perspective he would like noted, but the collection is there —preserved. And its value has been acknowledged and clearly understood within her lifetime. Helen Creighton has helped Canada take a leading role in preserving and focusing on its own cultural heritage. In turn her own informants have celebrated her talents and turned their traditional process, the art of song making on the collector.

As Eddy Deal sang,

Now there is Miss Creighton, she feels rather sore,
I don't think she'll come down to Seabright, no more,
She came down to Seabright
a looking for tales

And all that she found was six fish without scales.

Now her heart it is heavy and her feet they are sore,
The sea gulls goes loudly and the billows they roar,
And when she gets back to the old Dartmouth shore
I don't think she'll make a recording no more.

Now boys, just a moment, you've all had your say
While enjoying yourselves in so pleasant a way,
The devil got in me one dark foggy morn
As the dawn birds sang sweetly, I'll now end my song.

Right torrel, right torrel, right torrel oh dey,
For to see those queer sights, Miss Creighton came a long way,

71. Helen Creighton, “Folklore of Victoria Beach, Nova Scotia”, *Journal of American Folklore*, 63 (1950), 131.

And it cost her from one to two dollars a day.
Right torrel, right torrel, Paddy whack fol the dey.⁷²

American folklorists can do worse than follow the lead of a lady who had collecting ability that was "enough to charm the heart of a wheelbarrow and make a shovel dance."

Vermont Council on the Arts
Montpelier, Vermont

72. *Maritime Folk Songs*, p. 193.