

Compared to the first, I have to confess that I found the second CD less enthralling. Not that it is poor; indeed it is a very valuable historical document. Perhaps it is just that the genre of the shanty is limited in variety, and the songs have to be performed really vigorously and tunefully to sustain extended listening. There are lots of shanties here, most of which are sung fairly effectively, although too often the informants end abruptly after a stanza or two with an apology that the remaining verses have slipped their memories. The result is that several of the items are fragments rather than complete songs. Many of the best performances date from 1943, and, luckily, there are quite a few of them: for example, Arthur Hilton, leading a group of Yarmouth Sea Captains in “Blow the Man Down”, “Whiskey Johnny”, “Robin Ranzo”, “Shenandoah”, “Homeward Bound” and “Poor Old Man”. Other informants include William H. Smith, recorded in Liverpool in August 1948, and Sandy Stoddard of Lower Ship Harbour, recorded

four years later. Tom Cornealy, one of my least favourite performers on the first CD, reappears on this one too, with a similar mix of tentative singing and confident recitation. Perhaps the two best tracks are Paul Myra’s version of “Blow My Bully Boys Blow”, which includes an account of rigging the schooner *Bluenose* for the legendary skipper Angus Walters, and Leander Macumber’s fragment of “Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her”, which is beautifully sung but all too brief. This CD has its moments, and it certainly does not lack interest, but musically it is inferior to its companion. Frankly, I would have preferred to have seen a second CD of ballad and other sea songs, with a few shanties mixed in. But perhaps the Creighton society has a specialized local market of Maritimes sailing buffs in mind with this one. My advice is to buy the set anyway, but primarily for the singing of Catherine Gallagher and Walter Roast on CD # 1.

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Clary Croft, *Helen Creighton: Canada’s First Lady of Folklore.*

Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 1999.

It is five years since Clary Croft’s biography of Helen Creighton was published, and I’ve no idea why it has taken the magazine so long to get around to reviewing it, except, I guess, that there can be many a slip ‘twixt cup and lip, and this one somehow did slip between the cracks. We owe Clary an apology, since this is an important work which will be of interest to anyone with a love of Canadian traditional song, and that presumably means just about all the readers of *Canadian Folk Music*. I suspect, in fact, that many of you will have already read the book, in which case, if you happen to disagree with anything I say, please write in and tell us why. To my shame I had not read it before, which is probably why I ended up with the reviewing assignment. On the other hand, I had heard a few comments about it, some of which led me to expect the worst. I was told (correctly) that Clary was Helen’s personal friend and disciple and (incorrectly) that in consequence the book is hagiography. I was told that Clary provides a year-by-year account of Helen’s public activities supplemented by as much detail on her personal life as her diaries afford, and that the reader quickly gets bored with all the minutiae. Well, this reader was not bored. Indeed, I had no difficulty in going through the book from cover to cover in the space of a couple of days. Admittedly I skimmed the first two chapters covering the early years of Creighton’s life before she had so much as heard of folk music, and to be truthful my concentration began to wander a little after Helen had



stopped working for the National Museum and had effectively given up collecting. But the main body of the book, dealing with the four decades from 1928 to

the end of the sixties, is fascinating. The last chapter, in which Croft sums up his perspective on Helen and takes on her critics, is also a must.

One should be clear about what biographer Croft does well and what, on the other hand, he does not try to do. Essentially this is a blow-by-blow, chronological account of the main activities of a person whose work was her life, and who had a public persona from her early thirties onwards. Because the biography is based to a considerable degree on Helen's diaries, extant correspondence and autobiography, we usually see incidents as she perceived them, and there are plenty of insights into how she responded to events and to other people. But the primary focus is on the public figure, and in the main we are left to build up from all this information about Creighton the folklorist our own portrait of Helen the human being. To be sure, there is some evidence from the diaries about the crises in her personal life: the ups and downs of her relationship with her mother, for example, or her abortive emotional entanglements with several male friends, almost all of whom, curiously, seem to have been called Joe. To some extent we do see Helen from the inside, warts and all, but just as she never really knew how she appeared to other people neither do we get a well-defined picture of her from the perspective of someone observing her life from the outside, as it were. For better or for worse, Croft mainly allows his sources to speak for themselves, making little attempt to extract from them a coherent, sharp-edged portrait. In a sense this is good, since we can be assured that he has not fitted Creighton into a predetermined mould, the way Ian MacKay did. Yet, one might be pardoned for concluding on reaching the final page that one still does not have a firm grasp of what Helen Creighton was really like. Was she a warm and considerate person, or was she egocentric and ruthless? It is difficult to be sure. No doubt Croft's aim was to demonstrate that she was both, at different times, but what is lacking is the overall balance sheet. Ultimately was she a cold person who, when it came to the crunch, repelled those who showed her affection, or was she just unlucky in love? When she treated a close friend badly, as she did on occasion with both Doreen Senior and Edith Fowke, did she regret her conduct, apologize for it, and do everything in her power to re-establish a warm and close relationship, or did she shrug it off and take refuge in her work? We are never really told Croft's own opinion. Obviously his own perception of Helen in the last decades of her life was as a friendly and considerate individual, but did his research ever lead him to question that image? It would be nice to know.

It is also important to recognize that this is a biography, not a study of Creighton's work as a song collector or as a quasi-academic folklorist. Despite Croft's own love of the Nova Scotian folksongs that Helen was instrumental in rescuing from oblivion, there is virtually no discussion of the details of her collecting. Nor is there much detailed information on her informants, although the book does include quite a few interesting photographs of source singers. In pointing this out, I am not criticizing Croft; he had his hands full reconstructing the events of Helen's career, and the book would have had to be twice the size had he made any serious attempt to deal with her *oeuvre* as well as her life. Moreover, although he does not get deeply into the specifics of her collecting, he does deal head on with some of the bigger issues that emerged in the course of her career.

Croft addresses the issues of Helen's supposed anti-modernism and ethnocentrism, and provides a sensibly nuanced response, which recognizes her political conservatism while rejecting MacKay's claim that she vigorously "resisted" the modern world and promoted an image of the province as peopled by an "imagined Folk" of her own devising. Again, while accepting that Creighton was not at her most comfortable when collecting from aboriginal or Afro-American Nova Scotians, Croft underlines that she nonetheless did her best to do so, as well as collecting extensively from other ethnic minorities such as francophone Acadians and Gaelic-speakers, even though she had no proficiency in either language. Nor does Croft duck such controversial incidents as Helen's suggestion to Carmen Roy that the National Museum should check to see if either Edith Fowke or Pete Seeger were communists before having any further dealings with them, or the manifest territoriality inherent in her rivalry with Laura Bolton. Furthermore, while it is evident that, in the main, Creighton maintained friendly and open relationships with her informants and that they liked and trusted her, Croft also makes it clear that she rarely paid them for their songs, nor did she make any attempt to share her (admittedly meagre) royalties with them, except when their contributions were used in movies or radio programs. Collecting folksongs and other kinds of folklore was for Helen a means of earning a living, although she never made much more than a subsistence wage while doing it. Of course, it was a job that she quickly came to enjoy. Creighton's love for the songs, as well as her absolute commitment to her adopted profession, comes through loud and clear in this biography. If it is hardly the last word on her work, it is nonetheless essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand her career.

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