

Helen Creighton and the Traditional Songs of Nova Scotia

Helen Creighton has been called by her biographer, Clary Croft, “Canada’s first lady of folklore”.¹ If by “first” is meant pre-eminent, Edith Fowke might have equal claim to that title, but Creighton was the earliest female Canadian folksong collector and for several decades the only important one.² In the later years of her life she was awarded many tokens of recognition for her pioneering work in recording the folksongs, tales and customs of her native province of Nova Scotia. These included the Province of Nova Scotia’s Cultural Life Award and an honorary fellowship in the American Folklore Society, as well as doctorates from six academic institutions, including Mount Allison University, Mount Saint Vincent University and l’Université de Laval. In 1976 she was made a Member of the Order of Canada.



Helen Creighton receiving an honorary doctorate from l’Université de Laval [PANS HC Fonds Binder 18:1041]

Nonetheless, Creighton has remained a controversial figure whose *oeuvre* has been largely neglected by Canadian academics, and whose methods and achievements have been subjected to severe criticism. It is now fifteen years since her death and over seventy-five years since she began collecting folksongs, so a reappraisal of what she did accomplish would seem well overdue. To date, there are only two major attempts to come to terms with her legacy: Clary Croft’s biography and Ian McKay’s *The Quest of the Folk*, in which Creighton is paired with handicraft revivalist Mary Black as a staunch opponent of “modernization”.³ To these books must be added a few scholarly articles, including two perceptive pieces by Diane Tye, “Retrospective Repertoire Analysis: The Case Study of Ben Henneberry”⁴ and “‘A Very Lone Worker’: Woman-Centred Thoughts on Helen Creighton’s Career as a Folklorist”,⁵ but what is striking is the lack of any

full-length study of Creighton’s work either as a folksong collector or as a ‘popular’ folklorist, the author of *Folklore of Lunenburg County*,⁶ *Bluenose Ghosts*⁷ and *Bluenose Magic*.⁸

Ghost stories, witchcraft and even curious old customs are a little passé these days, and Creighton’s approach as a collector of traditional folklore has been out of fashion in academic circles for several decades now – she is often written off as a “survivalist” – so the reluctance of the small band of folklorists teaching in Canadian universities to claim her as their own and to champion (or even study) her work is understandable, if none the less regrettable. Yet the apparent neglect of her very large and extremely impressive collection of Maritime folksongs is more difficult to fathom. Even if one accepts Ian McKay’s dubious claim that Creighton engaged in a quest for a mythical Nova Scotian “folk”, the songs that she noted from farmers, fishermen and housewives retain their own authenticity and beauty, independent of the collector’s values and ideology. We may not empathize with Creighton’s political and cultural conservatism, but we can surely still appreciate, sing and study the tunes and lyrics that she preserved for us. My aim here is to provide a brief overview of her work as a collector of “old songs” (the term preferred by most of her informants), in the hope that this will stimulate a resurgence of interest in her published collections (most of which are now out of print but ought to be reissued) and in the many treasures to be found in the *Creighton Fonds* at the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia in Halifax.

Helen Creighton was born in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, in 1899, and had a sheltered upbringing in a prosperous middle class family whose income derived mainly from the profits made by her father’s wholesale merchandising business.⁹ She never married, and by the early 1920s she was looking for a career that would provide her with an independent livelihood. Neither social work nor teaching proved to be her *métier* (although she briefly tried each of them), but she had some success as a writer of children’s stories and as a journalist and local broadcaster. A move to Ottawa to pursue a career as a freelance writer for *Saturday Night* and *Macleans Magazine* met with some limited success, but Helen was soon back in Dartmouth looking for a new way to make some money. A family friend, Henri Munro,

They moved around about us, till land was most in sight,
 Or rather I should say so, the lighthouse shone its light,
 And then those ghostly sailors moved to the rail again,
 And vanished in an instant before the sons of men.

We sailed right in the harbour and every mother's son
 Will tell the same sad story, the same as I have done.
 The trip before the other, we were off Georgia then,
 We ran down another vessel and sank her and her men.

These were the same poor fellows, I hope God rests their souls,
 That our old craft ran over and sank on Georgia Shoals.
 So now you have my story, it is just as I say,
 I do [did] not believe in spirits, until this very day.

When I Was In My Prime

Anon
 Enos Hartlan

The image shows four staves of musical notation in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are written below the notes. The first staff begins with a whole rest followed by a quarter rest, then the melody for 'When I was in my prime, I'. The second staff continues with 'flour-ished like a vine. There came a-long a'. The third staff continues with 'false young man, Came stole a-way my thyme, thyme, Came'. The fourth staff concludes with 'stole a-way my thyme.' and ends with a double bar line.

When I was in my prime,
 I flourished like a vine,
 There came along a false young man,
 Came stole away my thyme, thyme,
 Came stole away my thyme.

My thyme it is all gone,
 And that's what makes me mourn,
 The garnet [gardener] standing by
 Three offers he gave to me,
 The pink, the violet and red rose,
 Which I refuse all three, three,
 Which I refuse all three.

Now pink's no flower at all,
 For they fade away too soon,

And the violets are too pale a blue,
 I thought I'd wait till June, June,
 I thought I'd wait till June.

In June the red rose blooms
 And that's no flower for me,
 For then I'll pluck up a red rose, boys,
 And plant a willow tree, tree,
 And plant a willow tree.

The willow tree shall twist,
 And the willow tree shall twine,
 I wish I was in the young man's arms,
 The one the love of mine, mine,
 The one the love of mine.

There is a glorious plant
 That grows all over the land,
 And everybody my plant shall see
 I love that false young man, man,
 I love that false young man.

If I am spared for one year more
 And God shall grant me grace,
 I'll buy a barrel of crystal tears
 For to wash his deceitful face, face,
 For to wash his deceitful face.

Taping for the National Museum

With the advent of the tape-recorder, a new phase in Helen's career had begun, and from this point on she built up a large body of reel-to-reel tape recordings of traditional singers and storytellers from a variety of regions throughout Nova Scotia and southern New Brunswick. The originals of these tapes are housed in the Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, but copies were made for Helen's own use and these are now part of the *Helen Creighton Fonds* in the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia in Halifax. They were the principal source of the material made available in print form in Helen's later publications, especially *Maritime Folk Songs*²² and *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick*.²³

Helen made her first tape-recordings in Lunenburg County, working her way down the coast to West Pubnico and Cape Sable Island, but spending much of her time closer to home in such communities as Terence Bay, Sambro, Seabright and Little Harbour. In Terence Bay she recorded Edward and Everett Little singing "Franklin and his Bold Crew", and in Ragged Harbour a fine rendition by Charlie Harnish of the marine ballad "Brigantine Sirocco". Sambro was where she found an important new source singer, William Gilkie, from whom she obtained "Seventeen Come Sunday" and "Madam, Madam, You Came Courting" as well as another version of "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship". In West Pubnico she recorded more Acadian songs from Laura McNeil and the Amirault and Pothier families. She also went back to the lighthouse at Chebucto Head to capture Catherine Gallagher on tape for the first time. Catherine was now experiencing health problems (she died in 1957, after a long illness) and the recordings that Helen made of her singing during the years 1949-51 are not as extensive as one would like but they do include such ballads as "The Gallant Brigantine", "Plains of Waterloo" and "Young Riley".

The first half of the decade of the 1950s saw Creighton working regularly each summer for the National Museum. She was never a fulltime employee of the Museum, but she received a modest salary and travel expenses for her collecting trips, and she was usually given a free hand in deciding where to go, what to look for, and whom to record. It was a convenient arrangement, and it resulted in an invaluable series of recordings, far too many to discuss in any detail here. However, a brief overview of her activities may give some sense of what she accomplished. The first year of the new decade saw her working mainly in coastal communities south and

west of Halifax. William Gilkie was again one of her chief informants, but she also picked up a Robin Hood ballad from Mrs. Gilbert Flemming of Ketch Harbour and several songs, including "Lord Bateman", "Willie O" and "The Wounded Hussar", from David Slaunwhite of Terence Bay. In addition to songs of British derivation, Helen was finding shanties and other sea-songs that reflected the close dependence of these fishing villages on the harvest from the Atlantic Ocean. For example, Otis Hubley sang "Stormy Weather Boys" and "In Canso Strait", as well as the grisly broadside ballad "The Dreadful Ghost". Tom Cornealy of Halifax was an informative old shellback who claimed to have composed the marine ballad "Captain Conrod" in 1883, and he also sang "The Schooner Mary Anne" and several shanties. John Obe Smith of Seabright was another singing sailor discovered by Helen and he provided her with "Quays of Belfast", "A Sailor's Alphabet", and a song about Harbour Grace in Newfoundland. Edward Deal of the same coastal community contributed "The Eight Famous Fishermen", and Gordon Connelly of nearby Glen Haven offered a "Newfoundland Sealing Song" and "Moonlight Tonight Boys". Another highlight was Mrs. Lottie Grey's performance of "Jack the Sailor". Two decades had passed since Helen had begun her quest for pirate songs, but now she found several of them, including "Kelly the Pirate" from David Slaunwhite and "The Pirate's Serenade" from William Gilkie. Perhaps the most exciting find of all, however, was a Child ballad: Marguerite Letson's rendition of "Mary Hamilton".

By now Creighton had built up a lengthy list of informants to whom she could periodically return for more songs. The next few years saw her revisiting old haunts and former sources. For example, in 1951 she went back to West and East Petpeswick and recorded several members of the Young family, with Bernard, Berton and Freeman Young proving the most prolific of the singers: Bernard's contributions included "The Brown Girl", "The Banks of the Nile" and "When First To This Country", Berton's "The Banks of Newfoundland", and Freeman's "The Girl I Left Behind" and "Lovely Molly". John Roast of Chezzetcook offered "Down By the Fair River", while another pre-war discovery, Dennis Williams of Musquodoboit Harbour, sang "Three English Rovers", "In Lonely Belvedere" and "Cape Breton Murder". The francophone informants of West Pubnico were again a fruitful source of Acadian songs, with Laura McNeil performing "Catherine était fille", "C'était les fils de Babylone" and "Écrivez-moi" and Sephora Amirault "Chanson sur la mort de la Dauphine" and "Trois graines de

Primprenelle". But Helen also followed up new leads. One example was her discovery of Halifax seaman Dan Livingston, from whom she recorded a ballad, "The Wreck of the Caribou", about the torpedoing of the Nova Scotia/Newfoundland ferry by a German U-boat in 1942. She also located a new singer whom she would count among her best informants, Mr. Grace Clergy of East Petpeswick, whose repertoire included such sea songs as "On Board the *Victory*", "Jovial Young Sailor" and "The Bold *Princess Royal*" as well as such folk lyrics as "Early, Early in the Spring". And she added another important source singer to her roster the next year. This was Nathan Hatt of Middle River, near Chester, on the coast west of Halifax.



Nathan and Mrs. Hatt [PANS HC Fonds Binder 17:0788]

A dozen of the many songs that Helen collected from Nathan Hatt in 1952 would find their way into her subsequent publications, and she went so far as to write an article about him for *Dalhousie Review*. The following extracts from that piece, "The Songs of Nathan Hatt", give us a sense of the kind of rapport that Creighton developed with some of her informants as well as a picture of a fairly typical Nova Scotian traditional singer:

To see him you would not expect Nathan Hatt to be a singer. He is an old man now, turned eighty-seven, and spends his days sitting in his rocking chair with head bowed solemnly until something

pleases him when he looks up and his whole face becomes alight. Occasionally he enjoys a magazine because the pictures interest him, but he has to pass the stories by, for he can neither read nor write. Yet his life is full of stories – stories in song. If he had the strength he could sing a whole night through and never repeat. His voice has been heard of a summer evening as he sat on his back porch and his neighbours listened from their homes all along the Middle River valley. Others remember him carting lumber to Beech Hill, a nine mile trip begun before dawn with a return at sunset, walking proudly in front of his ox team and singing all the way...As a young man he must have been very strong. He owned and operated a mill first at Beech Hill and then at Middle River, which accounts for his nickname, Chippy. Then his world crashed about him...and he has suffered for the last fifteen years from pernicious anaemia. Being deaf and illiterate a less resourceful man might have given up in discouragement, but not Nathan Hatt. He had his songs for recreation, and they have been his constant companions.

[When I arrived at the Hatts' small white house] Mr. Hatt was sitting in a rocking chair in the room next the kitchen and seemed pleased to have a visitor. The doctor made the introductions and left immediately. I asked Mr. Hatt to sing. He started off in something less than a minute, but with head averted from shyness. As he got to know me better his head came gradually around, and he would break into merry chuckles when something in his songs amused him. His first song was "The Gay Spanish Maid", pleasant, tuneful and a love song with a sea motif. His voice for all his years and his manner of singing it were encouraging, but I had often taken this song down before, and wanted to hear more before jumping to any conclusion. He followed this with "The Foot of the Mountain Brow" which was also tuneful, and one I had only recorded once before. But it was his third song that settled the matter...This was a variant of "The Twa Brothers" found in *Child's English and Scottish Popular Ballads* and in my *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* as well as a few other collections. It was so changed from my only other variant that at first I failed to recognize it although I knew it belonged to the category of songs known as Child ballads... [T]he words set my eyes to dancing, as they always do when a rare ballad is discovered. The tune has not yet been written down...For several days I worked with Mr. Hatt, adding more and more songs to my collection. Ten, twenty, thirty, where was it going to end? And what of the tape recorder in my car, useless in a house without electricity?...Chester Light and Power finally solved the problem by running a cable some three hundred feet from the nearest house

[although] the power was always disconnected at night and put on again in the morning. Forty-seven songs: could I get him up to fifty? Three more songs would do it, but that day he sang fifteen. To date he has sung seventy-two... [His daughter, Nellie McInnes] proved a great help [since] if Mr. Hatt sang a song in the evening that he had not thought of during the day, she would jot it down on the calendar. His mind apparently is at its best in the evening, but the power was always off then and we could not record. In fact we only worked three hours in the afternoon each day because he did not get up until noon, but that was enough. One afternoon we turned the recording machine off and plugged my radio in to listen to the C.B.C. program *Folk Song Time*. Singers love to hear their own songs, but it is seldom that two people sing them exactly the same. He listened to "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight" which he had sung a few days before, and then repeated it as soon as the program was over... Other Child ballads sung by Mr. Hatt are "Geordie", "Bonny Barbara Allan", "The Farmer's Curs't Wife", "The Cruel Mother", "The Gypsy Laddie", and two verses of "Lord Bateman". He also sings "He's Young But He's Daily A-Growing".²⁴

Nathan Hatt's repertoire was not limited to ballads, Child or otherwise, since he also provided Creighton with texts and tunes of a considerable number of folk lyrics. She would return to record him again in 1954, at which time he sang another Child ballad, "The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter". By then Helen had under her belt two more collecting seasons with a tape-recorder, and they were among the most fruitful of her entire career as a folklorist. The list of her informants in these years runs to over two dozen. Many of them were located in the coastal communities east, south and west of Halifax, the areas that remained her best sources of Nova Scotian traditional song, but she was also ranging further afield, to Wolfville and the Annapolis valley, to River John and the northern coast (in search of surviving informants who had sung to Roy Mackenzie), to Cape Breton, and to New Brunswick.

In New Brunswick Helen worked out an informal territorial division of labour with Louise Manny, and focused on the countryside just north of the Bay of Fundy, although, in conjunction with Louise, she did also record Acadian songs from Joseph McGarth and Charles Robichaud in Newcastle, picking up from the former the lyric, "La fleur du rosier", that would eventually be used as the title-song of her last published collection. Of the many singers and songs Helen captured on tape in Nova Scotia during the early fifties, a few new names stand out in addition to Nathan Hatt: Harold Hilshie of Pope's Harbour who

sang "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard", Jack Turple of Upper Kennetcook who contributed "The Constant Farmer's Son", Ernest Bell of West New Annan who knew "Robbie Tampson's Smitty", and Leander Macumber of Cheverie who offered "Hind Horn". But some of her older informants were not to be outdone; Berton Young, for example, provided a "Nova Scotia Sealing Song", Bernard Young offered his version of "Lost Jimmie Whalen", and Freeman Young sang a rare Canadian variant of "Rinordine".



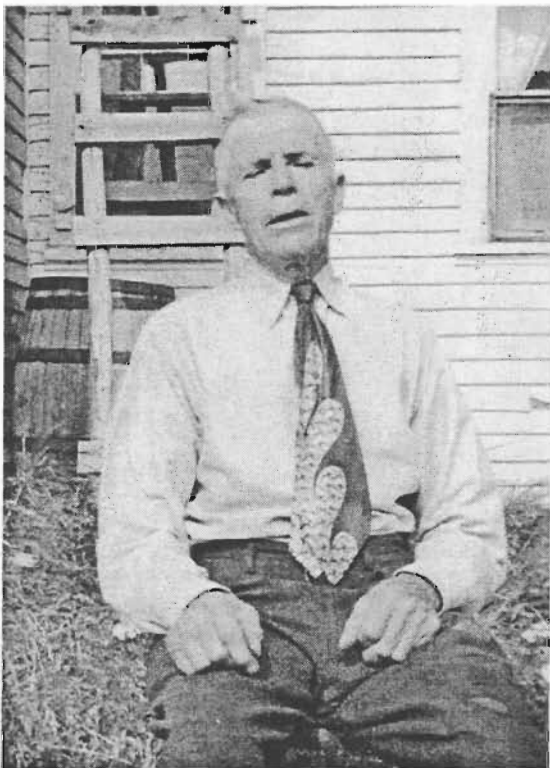
Helen Creighton, with Roy and Mrs. Mackenzie [PANS HC Fonds Binder 17: 0702]

The mid-1950s were also banner years for Creighton, with 1954 particularly rich in discoveries. For one thing, she was making some progress with her resumed quest for Gaelic language songs from Cape Breton. Hugh F. MacKenzie of Grand Narrows had helped start the ball rolling again with "Bu Deonach Leam Tilleadh" ("I Would Willingly Return"), and Helen discovered a Cape Breton Club in Halifax whose members regaled her with "Mairi Nighean Domhnail" ("Mary, Donald's Daughter"). During the next few years she had located Lauchie Gillis in Grand Mira, John R. McKeigan in Marion Bridge, and Mr. & Mrs. Archie MacMaster in Port Hastings. From McKeigan she collected "Oran Do Cheap Breatainn" and from the MacMasters "Mo Nighean Donn as Boidhche" ("My Most Beautiful Brown-Haired Maiden").

When Helen drove to Cape Breton in 1954 she also had good luck finding francophone informants and Acadian songs. Peter Chiasson of Grand Étang, for example, contributed "Dans la prison de Nantes", "Haid do lai do" and "Quand j'étais su' mon père". Moreover, Helen's usual informants in West Pubnico (Laura McNeil, the Amiraults and the Pothiers) seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of new Acadian songs, and she also recorded several children's songs from "les enfants de l'école de Pubnico-ouest". This was the time, too, when Helen

discovered the Redden family of Middle Musquodoit: Fred Redden, from whom she recorded “The Swan” and “Lovely Jimmy”, and his daughter Finvola who contributed “By Kells Waters”. Helen was much taken by Finvola’s voice and musical abilities, and subsequently took her to arts festivals, employed her as a singer to illustrate lectures, and encouraged her to train for a professional career (an option that Finvola eventually decided against).

Creighton’s field-work in southern New Brunswick turned out to be the most productive of all her collecting expeditions for the National Museum. The main reason was Angelo Dornan, one of the two or three most prolific and talented singers that she ever recorded. Dornan, a farmer of Irish extraction who had spent much of his life in Western Canada, now lived in Elgin, N.B., and he had a huge repertoire, which he sang in an elaborately decorated manner. In 1953 he had contacted Helen by mail, inviting her to come and record him and his friend, William Ireland, the local blacksmith. A year later, after the invitation had been renewed, Helen somewhat reluctantly took him up on his offer, since she regarded New Brunswick as primarily Louise Manny’s turf.



Angelo Dornan [PANS HC Fonds Binder 17:0828]

This is the way Helen described Angelo Dornan in *Maritime Folk Songs*:

Mr. Dornan’s father had a great reputation for old songs, which he had learned in logger’s camps while river driving...He would sit bent over with his hand covering one eye, always indoors and unaccompanied, the children sitting fascinated on wood box, floor or bench. At the age of nineteen Angelo moved to Alberta, where he never heard his songs again and where he sang them only occasionally when teaming his horses. Even his wife had no idea that he knew any songs. In his middle sixties, however, he grew homesick and bought a farm near the old home, and when he visited his relatives they would ask, “Angelo, do you remember such and such a song?” Gradually the old time songs came back until by now one hundred and thirty-five have gone into my microphone. 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. He embellishes his tunes with grace notes as his father must have done before him, and says that now he has come to the bottom of his barrel of memory. Even he is surprised that so many have returned to him, and he is especially proud of one that takes twenty minutes to sing.²⁵

The twenty-minute song was the “The True Lovers’ Discursion”, which had twenty verses in Dornan’s version. Helen would eventually publish about eighty of Angelo’s songs, the first nine (including “Easter Snow”, “Phoebe” and “He’s Young But He’s Daily A-Growing”) appearing in *Maritime Folk Songs*. The rest, a mixture of broadside ballads, Child ballads, English folk lyrics, Irish and Scottish songs, and sea-songs, comprised the core of *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick*, which Helen described in her introduction as “The Dornan Book of Songs”.²⁶ They included (among many others) “Gypsy Laddie”, “The Golden Vanity”, “Sir James the Ross”, “The Banks of Claudie”, “Plains of Waterloo”, “The Sea Captain (Maid on the Shore)” and “The Stormy Winds of Winter”. Creighton also collected a significant number of songs from other residents of the region, with blacksmith William Ireland in particular proving a valuable informant. She included his “Jack Munro” in *Maritime Folk Songs*, and nearly twenty more of his songs, including “The House Carpenter”, “The Sheffield Prentice” and “Brave Nelson”, appeared in *Folksongs of Southern New Brunswick*.

While she spent her summers collecting for the Museum, Helen devoted the winters to cataloguing and writing up her research. She had continued to collect other kinds of folklore as well as songs, and in 1957 she published the book for which she is most widely known and which provided her with the largest financial return, *Bluenose Ghosts*. She would

follow it just over a decade later with a sequel, *Bluenose Magic*.

After the publication of *Bluenose Ghosts* Helen was a minor celebrity and spin-off media activities were beginning to take more and more of her time. For example, in 1953 she was involved with the production of a folk opera, *The Broken Ring*, in 1956 with a Nova Scotia Travel Bureau movie titled *Marine Highway*, and in 1957 with the CBC television program *Graphic* and the National Film Board production *Songs of Nova Scotia*.²⁷ She also believed firmly in the importance of publicizing the folksongs and folk tales that she had collected, and to this end wrote a number of articles, including "Fiddles, Folksongs and Fishermen's Yarns" in *Canadian Geographical Journal* (1955)²⁸ and "Songs for Christmas" in the *Atlantic Advocate* (1959).²⁹

These shorter pieces were followed in 1962 by Creighton's third major published collection of (mainly) Nova Scotian traditional songs, *Maritime Folk Songs*. It was based on a selection of her tape-recordings for the National Museum, and the transcriptions were predominantly the work of Kenneth Peacock. This was the best documented of Helen's books, the only one in which she (or perhaps Peacock) took care to include both the date and the place of collecting for each song, yet the scholarly notes were inferior to those provided in *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* or even *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*.

Helen continued collecting songs throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, in part with a view to expanding her Acadian collection. For example, in 1957 she went back to Cape Breton to tape more songs from Peter Chiasson in Grand Étang, on which occasion she also recorded nine items at a milling frolic. Other Acadian songs were to be heard at the Miramichi Folk Festival organized by Louise Manny in Newcastle, N.B., and Helen took along her tape recorder for several years running, from 1958 to 1962, to record, among others, Chiasson and Allan and Roger Kelly.

Helen's other major project in the early sixties was to pull together the scattered results of her episodic collecting of Gaelic-language songs. She found a Gaelic-speaking collaborator, Calum MacLeod, who undertook to check the accuracy of her Gaelic texts and to create poetic translations of them. He also suggested that it would be a good idea to re-collect the songs that Helen had tried to capture during World War II with the Library of Congress disc recorder but had lost due to technical difficulties. This prompted Helen's last major burst of field

collecting in Cape Breton. She went back to Lauchie Gillis at Grand Mira and also recorded many other members of the Gillis clan (including Angus, Christine, Malcolm and Mrs Sandy Sheumais Gillis) at Gillisdale and Margaree. Other prolific informants included Angus MacLellan from the same region of Cape Breton, Frank McNeil from Big Pond, and Vincent MacPherson from Upper South River, near Antigonish on the mainland. Their contributions, added to the fruits of Helen's earlier collecting from 1932 onwards, formed the basis of her 1964 publication, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*.³⁰

By the beginning of the 1960s, however, Helen's relationship with the National Museum, excellent while Marius Barbeau was a powerful influence in Ottawa, was beginning to deteriorate. The Museum bureaucracy, perhaps in an effort to satisfy its political masters, perhaps just following changing intellectual fashions, was becoming dismissive of "mere collecting" and anxious that its field workers should engage in more "scientific" forms of folklore. Helen's supervisor at the Museum, Carmen Roy, suggested that she conduct a series of interviews to determine whether Nova Scotians believed that Canada was suffering from an inferiority complex. Helen balked at this, and proposed instead a field-trip to Grand Manan Island, located off the southern New Brunswick coast. She got her way, but was disappointed to find that ballad singing was not common on the island, although she collected other folklore from the inhabitants.

Another of Helen's projects, which Roy and the Museum rejected, was to work on repertoire for a newly created choir of Cape Breton miners and former miners called *Men of the Deepes*. Helen did this anyway, as a volunteer, but *Gaelic Songs of Nova Scotia* was the last major publication on which she worked under the museum's auspices. She continued to do some field-work in the early '60s, mainly on Cape Breton and at the western end of Prince Edward Island, but she was getting weary of life on the road and becoming less tolerant of the foibles of informants. Among her last recordings were those she made at the 1962 Miramichi Folk Festival and at Tignish, P.E.I., where she collected "La belle rose" and "Parti pour un voyage" from Hector Richard and his wife.

Thereafter Helen concentrated on editing, publishing, and publicizing the fruits of her earlier work. At the beginning of the sixties she participated in a CBC documentary, *Land of the Old Songs*, about her song-collecting in Nova Scotia, and in 1966 she appeared in another CBC film, titled *Lady of Legends*, about

herself and the stories she had printed in *Bluenose Ghosts*. This was good publicity for her books, as was the staging of *The Broken Ring* at Expo the next year.

Helen's twenty years as a part-time employee of the National Museum had come to an end in 1966, and thereafter the Museum did little to further publish or circulate the fruits of her work. It was unwilling to subsidize the publication of her Acadian song collection, and it failed to bring out any LP records of her field recordings. Luckily Moses Asch had a better understanding of the importance of those recordings. So a few dozen selections from the recordings Helen had made for the Library of Congress and for the National Museum did find an outlet, on two LP records released in the USA on the Folkways label. The first, *Folk Music from Nova Scotia*,³¹ first appeared in 1956 and was reissued in 1964; it included English folksongs and ballads by Angelo Dornan, Catherine Gallagher, Nathan Hatt, Edmund Henneberry, and Fred Redden, shanties by Leander Macumber and William Smith, a Gaelic song by Malcolm Angus MacLeod, Acadian songs from Laura McNeil and Mrs Louis and Mrs Sephora Amirault, and a Mi'kmaq war song by Chief William Paul.

The second LP, *Maritime Folk Songs from the Collection of Helen Creighton*,³² was released in 1962 to coincide with the publication of the book of the same name. Several of the same source singers were included: Angelo Dornan performing "When I Wake in the Morning", Catherine Gallagher with "My Gallant Brigantine" and "Young Riley", and Nathan Hatt singing "He's Young But He's Daily A-Growing". There was one Gaelic selection (Jon Ranny McKeigan's "Oran Do Cheap Breatainn"), one Acadian one (Laura McNeil's "Catherine était fille"), and one Afro-American spiritual (Charles Owens' "What Harm Has Jesus Done You"), and the record provided a chance to hear what some of Creighton's more recent informants sounded like. They included Grace Clergy, who sang Helen's favourite "Peggy Gordon" as well as "On Board of the *Victory*" and "In Cupid's Court", and David Slaunwhite, who performed "Kelly the Pirate" and "Young Beichan". Other highlights included Neil O'Brien's version of "All 'Round My Hat", Mrs Stan Marshall's "A Maid I Am in Love", and Porter Brigley's "I Dyed My Petticoat Red" (which employed the Jacobite air "Shule Aroon"). These two records nonetheless provided only a tantalizing taste of the wealth of Nova Scotian traditional music captured on disc and tape by Creighton between 1943 and 1954. There should have been more.

When she parted ways with the National Museum, Creighton's active career as a folklorist and folksong collector was effectively over. She brought out *Bluenose Magic* in 1968, wrote her autobiography (*A Life in Folklore*, published in 1975), and lived to see the belated publication of *La Fleur du Rosier* in 1988.³³ She died in 1989, soon after celebrating her ninetieth birthday.



Helen Creighton honoured after a performance of "The Collector" in 1980 [PANS HC Fonds Binder 19: 1261]

Opinions will vary concerning the validity and value of Creighton's work as a professional folklorist, and unfortunately some critics will no doubt continue to write off *The Folklore of Lunenburg County*, *Bluenose Ghosts* and *Bluenose Magic* as examples of survivalism and vulgarization. Despite her involvement with *Men of the Deeps* and her efforts to collect from such ethnic minorities as Afro-Americans, the Mi'kmaq, and the Acadian community, she will likely continue to be attacked as interested primarily in rural Nova Scotia and in the Anglo-Celtic cultural heritage of the province. Her conservative moral values and her rightwing politics (which, at worst, extended to virulent anti-communism) will not endear her to some readers of her autobiography or Clary Croft's biography.

Yet, when all this is said, one cannot gainsay Helen's tremendous accomplishment as a collector of "old songs". Her song collection is huge, and much of it is of high quality. It lives on in two forms: in print in six books, and on disc and tape in three locations (the Library of Congress, the Museum of Civilization, and the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia). What

we need nowadays is much greater and easier access, in digital form, to these audio collections.

David Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

Notes

¹ Clary Croft, *Helen Creighton: Canada's First Lady of Folklore*. Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 1999.

² Elisabeth Greenleaf did begin collecting a few years earlier, but she was American and Newfoundland was at that time not part of Canada.

³ Ian MacKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's U.P., 1994.

⁴ Diane Tye, "Retrospective Repertoire Analysis: The Case Study of Ben Henneberry, Ballad Singer of Devil's Island, Nova Scotia", *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*, 16 (1988): 3-15.

⁵ Diane Tye, "'A Very Lone Worker': Woman-Centred Thoughts on Helen Creighton's Career as a Folklorist", *Journal of the Canadian Folklore Studies Association*, 15:2 (1993): 107-117.

⁶ Helen Creighton, ed., *Folklore of Lunenburg County*. Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1950.

⁷ Helen Creighton, ed., *Bluenose Ghosts*. Toronto: McGraw, 1957.

⁸ Helen Creighton, ed., *Bluenose Magic*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968.

⁹ All factual information in this article about the personal aspects of Creighton's life is taken from Croft's biography, cited above.

¹⁰ Roy Mackenzie, ed., *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928. Reprint: Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1963.

¹¹ John Murray Gibbon, ed., *Canadian Folk Songs*. Toronto: Dent, 1927.

¹² Helen Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, 48-49. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975.

¹³ At this time it was customary in Nova Scotia for married women to be known by their husband's first name as well as by his surname. Unfortunately in many instances Creighton seems to have failed to find out and record her female informants' real first names, as in the case of Mrs. Osborne.

¹⁴ Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, 52.

¹⁵ Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, 58-60.

¹⁶ Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present Day*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985.

¹⁷ Helen Creighton, ed., *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*. Toronto: Dent, 1933. Revised edition: New York: Dover, 1966.

¹⁸ Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, 71.

¹⁹ Creighton, *A Life in Folklore*, 95-96.

²⁰ Helen Creighton & Doreen H. Senior, eds., *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1950.

²¹ Creighton & Senior, *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*, x.

²² Helen Creighton, ed., with musical transcriptions by Kenneth Peacock, *Maritime Folk Songs*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1962.

²³ Helen Creighton, ed., with musical transcriptions by Kenneth Peacock, *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1971.

²⁴ Helen Creighton, "The Songs of Nathan Hatt", *Dalhousie Review*, 32 (1953): 59-64.

²⁵ Creighton, *Maritime Folk Songs*, 47.

²⁶ Creighton, *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick*, 1.

²⁷ The list of films with which Creighton was involved in one way or another is quite lengthy. It includes *The Rising Tide* (1950), *Marine Highway* (1956), *Graphic* (1957), *Songs of Nova Scotia* (1957), *Land of the Old Songs* (1960), *Garry Karr and Friends* (1963), *Nova Scotia Byways* (1963), *Lady of the Legends* (1966), *Take Thirty* (1967), *Bluenose Ghosts* (1975), *The Nova Scotia Song* (1986) and *Evergreen* (1987).

²⁸ Helen Creighton, "Fiddles, Folksongs and Fishermen's Yarns", *Canadian Geographical Journal*, 51 (1955): 212-221.

²⁹ Helen Creighton, "Songs for Christmas", *Atlantic Advocate*, 50 (1959): 62-68.

³⁰ Helen Creighton & Calum MacLeod, eds., *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*. Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1964. Reprinted: Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979.

³¹ Folkways FM 4006.

³² Folkways FE 4307.

³³ Helen Creighton & Ronald Labelle, eds., *La Fleur du Rosier: Acadian Folksongs*. Sydney, N.S.: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1988.

the province's Superintendent of Education, showed her a copy of Roy Mackenzie's *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*¹⁰ and suggested that a similar publication showcasing songs collected in the south-west of the province might be a profitable venture. In her autobiography, *A Life in Folklore*, Creighton recalled that at the time she had no idea what a folksong was, but before long she was enthusiastically pouring over Mackenzie's book and John Murray Gibbon's *Canadian Folk Songs*.¹¹ Munro's advice seemed worth considering seriously.¹²

Early Years

Creighton's life-long involvement with folksong began in the Spring of 1928. Invited to a picnic on the beach at Eastern Passage, a fishing community a few miles along the coast from Dartmouth, she took the opportunity to inquire of the villagers whether they knew any folksongs or folk tales. She found both, and also began a friendship with the Osborne family that would endure for several decades. Mrs. Thomas Osborne,¹³ who would later provide Helen with versions of such broadside ballads as "The Dark-Eyed Sailor", "The Lakes of Ponchartrain" and "Caroline and her Young Sailor Bold", told her about the Hartlans, a singing family who lived in the neighbouring community of South-East Passage.

From Enos Hartlan, who proved to be a story-teller with a sizeable number of yarns, Helen collected her first folksong, "When I Was a Young Man I Took Delight In Love", and a love lament that would remain a favourite of hers for the rest of her life, the beautiful "When I Was in My Prime".

This is how, many years later, Helen recalled her first meeting with Enos:

Mr. Enos answered our knock; he was a small man with bright blue eyes, wispy graying hair and a grey moustache, and he greeted us with old world courtesy. Being naturally direct I said, "I hear you sing old songs down here." He agreed. "We don't sing nothin' else. I used to be a pretty singer. I could sing all day and all night and all the next day and never sing the same song twice. You see them stars in the sky? As many stars as there are up there is as many songs as I used to sing, but now me teeth is gone and and me voice is rusty. But come in, come in." Then he told me about the Ghost House, that it had been built from wrecks, which was risky as the drowned seamen might still be in the wood...Eventually I brought the conversation back to songs. It was a pity Mrs. Hartlan was out, for men sing more willingly and freely with their wives' support.

There was much clearing of the throat and repeated regrets that "the bats" had got into it, but he finally started with his tune pitched much too high, a common practice among folk singers. The tune of "When I Was a Young Man I Took Delight in Love," a song I've never taken down since nor found in any book, wandered all over the scale and I wondered how I would ever get it down.¹⁴



Enos Hartlan [PANS HC Fonds Album 14: 14-2]

One of Enos' relatives, Richard Hartlan, had an even larger and more varied repertoire of songs. They included such Child ballads as "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship" and "The Golden Vanity", Irish songs (including "The Croppy Boy"), sea songs ("The *Flying Cloud*" and "The Banks of Newfoundland"), lumbering songs such as "Peter Rambelay", and even a local song about a nearby island, "McNab's Island". Creighton had no difficulty obtaining the words of these songs from her informants, but getting the tunes down accurately was another matter, even when she recorded them using her father's Dictaphone machine. For a while she had assistance from music teacher Peryl Daly, but Daly's heart wasn't in folksong collecting. An alternative solution was to take along a melodeon and try to play the tunes back to the singers. This worked fairly well, as most informants were willing to tell

When I Was a Young Man

Anon
Enos Hartlan

When I was a young man I took de-light in love, I
gave my heart un-to a girl who did in-con-stant prove. She prom-ised for to be my
own true love, Which makes me sigh and say, But now I find she has changed her mind to
a quite con-trar-y way

When I was a young man I took delight in love,
I gave my heart unto a girl who did inconstant prove.
She promised for to be my own true love,
Which makes me sigh and say,
But now I find she has changed her mind
To a quite contrary way.

I went unto my love one day and this to her did say,
“As we have loved each other this long and many a day,
But now I’ve come to let you know
That married we should be.
So then,” said he, “Let us agree
And point a wedding day.”

“Oh no,” replied this fair maid, “I think you are in haste,
For I never knew a young man to spend his days in waste.
For the time is gone since you might ‘a had
All opportunity,
For now you see, you shan’t have me,
Some other you may go and try.

“You may go and tell your mother dear that love you have not crossed,
And if you went the right way to work your love you ne’er would have lost.
You ne’er would ‘a lost, my boy,
The truth I do intone,
Or in the spring had you cropped my wing,
From you I never would have flown.”

Now come, my boys, fill up your bowls, don’t let it be said we die,
If she proves false I will do so, and some other I will go and try.
I will go try, my boy,
We’ll sail the ocean o’er,
For the loss of one is a gain of two,
And a choice of twenty more.

her when she hadn't got the melody or the rhythm quite right, but it was a laborious process, and there were some tunes that Creighton was never quite satisfied that she had noted correctly. She was right about this; "Dark-Eyed Sailor" was an example of a transcription that she would later correct on the basis of a subsequent recording of the song's distinctive melody.

From another family at South-East Passage, the Faulknors, who had relatives living on nearby Devil's Island, Helen not only obtained such local songs as "Back Bay Hill" and "Canso Strait" and Irish songs like "Tim Finnigan's Wake", she also found out about the island's most famous singer, Ben Henneberry. Perhaps because of their isolated dwelling place, the Henneberrys were a singing family *par excellence*, and Ben's son Edmund would eventually inherit his father's huge repertoire and sing selections from it for Helen on CBC radio. In 1928-29, however, it was Ben, the family patriarch, who was Helen's most prolific informant, contributing several dozen songs. Helen gave this account on collecting on Devil's Island:

Devil's Island is one mile in circumference and never more than eleven feet above sea level. At that time there were seventeen houses there, fourteen of which were occupied. The inhabitants were of English, Irish and Welsh descent and the Henneberrys, whose name was predominant, probably came with Alexander McNutt early in the nineteenth century when he brought 300 Irish settlers over. Fishing was their occupation and they found their catch in waters near at hand. They also had a government lifeboat of which Mr. Ben was coxswain...I realized that if I wanted songs I must go to the island and stay, so...I asked Mrs. Faulkner if she would board me. Then came one of the most strenuous weeks I've ever spent...In the morning, Mr. Ben, so called to distinguish him from all the other Henneberrys, 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 a leather handle, but it was too heavy to carry, so I pushed it in the Faulknors' wheelbarrow. In the afternoon the children sang their fathers' songs, and it was strange to hear from them of Villikens and his Dinah, and how he "kissed her cold corpus a thousand times o'er." 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. Mrs. Henneberry would give what encouragement she could. One afternoon he sang the whole seventy-eight verses of "The Courtship of Willie Riley" at one sitting. I shifted from one hand to the other, trying to keep up with the words. 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. The singers were never interrupted except to help if a word or line was forgotten. If the tempo was too quick to write down all the words at the first singing, I would get the opening line of each new verse and fill in later because in repeating, a whole verse might be left out. Then came the tune and everybody helped. They felt that what I was doing was important, but if their songs were being preserved, they wanted them to be right...During my stay on the island, 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.¹⁵



Ben Henneberry, with Helen Creighton, on Devil's Island [PANS HC Fonds Binder 16: 0377]

Ben Henneberry's repertoire reflected the mixed ancestry of the islanders. Some of his songs, such as "Whiskey in the Jar", "Mantle So Green" and "Willie Riley's Courtship", were obviously of Irish origin, but many were English or Scottish ballads. There were Child ballads, such as "The Cruel Mother", "Catherine Jaffray" and "The Farmer's Curst Wife", and, perhaps surprisingly, a couple of Robin Hood ballads ("The Bold Pedlar and Robin Hood" and "Robin Hood's Progress to Nottingham"). Henneberry also knew a variety of broadside ballads: "Silvy", "Well Sold the Cow" and "Napoleon's Farewell to Paris" can serve as three quite diverse

examples. And there were local songs narrating the fate of ships known to sailors along the province's Atlantic coastline, such as "The *Mary L. MacKay*". Most of these ballads Creighton collected on Devil's Island, with the help of her melodeon, although Henneberry, who was justifiably proud of his repertoire, was willing occasionally to sing into the Dictaphone (which required electricity) at the Creighton residence in Dartmouth.

Creighton, who at this early point in her career seems slightly to resemble Dave Harker's caricature of folksong collectors as 'mediators' who exploit working class culture,¹⁶ tried immediately to garner some income from her discoveries by selling six of her informants' sea songs to John Murray Gibbon for use at a Sea Music Festival in Victoria sponsored by the Canadian Pacific Railway. She also set to work compiling a songbook modeled on Mackenzie's *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*, but soon realized that she needed help. Helen not only lacked the expertise to transcribe the melodies accurately in musical notation, her knowledge of other folksong collections and the related secondary literature was as yet quite inadequate. After an abortive attempt at collaboration with an academic from Dalhousie University, she eventually went to Toronto to search for what she needed. In ballad scholar John Robins of Victoria College she found the necessary guide to folksong scholarship, and Healey Willan of the Toronto Conservatory of Music proved to be the music editor she required to take charge of the musical transcriptions. Eventually, too, a publisher was located, and early in 1933 there appeared in print *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, the first of Helen's six principal published folksong collections.¹⁷ It comprised one hundred and fifty songs, and quickly became recognized by British and American folklorists as a Canadian classic, to be consulted alongside Mackenzie's works and Elisabeth Greenleaf's parallel Newfoundland collection. There are two versions of *Songs and Ballads* in existence: the original 1933 publication (often erroneously dated as 1932, an error made by Creighton herself in 1966 and again in 1975 and dutifully repeated thereafter by many other people), and a 1966 second edition which has the superficial appearance of a facsimile reprint but is actually no such thing, since Creighton took the opportunity to correct what she had subsequently decided were errors in noting some of the tunes (the corrections, however, were made on the basis of later recordings of the songs, so it is always possible that they do not in fact reflect the way the melodies were originally sung in 1928-30).

Collaboration with Doreen Senior

By 1932 Creighton was ready to start work on a second folksong collection, but it was obvious that she needed to improve her skills as a musician or, alternatively, she required a collecting partner who could note melodies by ear. She found the latter in Doreen Senior, a young English music teacher who had been hired to teach a summer school in Halifax on folk dancing. Doreen was a graduate of the English Folk Dance Society's training program, and a disciple and friend of Maud Karpeles. Once she had finished her teaching duties in Halifax, she was eager to explore the beauties of rural Nova Scotia and happy to help out Helen at the same time. The two women headed for Cape Breton in Helen's father's car – nicknamed "Cecil" (after Doreen's hero Cecil Sharp) – and, to their mutual surprise, found not English folksongs but Gaelic ballads. Their principal informants were Donald B. MacLeod of Breton Cove (on the Atlantic coast of the island, north of St. Ann's Bay) and Malcolm Angus MacLeod of nearby Birch Plain. According to Helen's later testimony the two collectors spent about a week on Cape Breton and obtained about three dozen songs, some of which were recorded on an Edison phonograph that Helen had purchased for the occasion. The disadvantage with this collecting method turned out to be that the wax cylinders could be played only a few times before they became worn down, although a few of these recordings have apparently survived and are preserved (albeit in poor condition) in the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia. Doreen, in any case, had little difficulty in noting tunes directly from the singers, although the Gaelic lyrics gave Helen endless trouble. Ten of the melodies transcribed by Doreen would eventually be included in a book published thirty-two years later: *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, which Helen co-edited with Calum MacLeod.

Collecting Gaelic material had not been in Helen's plans, but she and Doreen enjoyed their trip and got on well together; moreover, it was evident that Doreen possessed the musical skills that Helen lacked. Blessed with perfect pitch, she was also familiar with many of the traditional songs, taken mainly from his own and Sabine Baring-Gould's collecting, that Cecil Sharp had published and popularized for use in English elementary schools. Helen later recalled that "Doreen sang a lot as we drove. She knew so many English folk songs that I was continually learning about my craft".¹⁸ Meeting Doreen had rekindled Helen's desire to visit the United Kingdom, and she did just that in the summer of 1933, taking part, accompanied by John Murray

Gibbon, in a package tour designed for Canadian authors that included meetings with Thomas Hardy's widow, Rudyard Kipling (Helen's favourite author) and George Bernard Shaw. Doreen, meanwhile, was back in Halifax, teaching another summer school, so the two friends got together for a second collecting trip that fall. Their plan was to make their way along the Atlantic seaboard, east of Halifax. They started in West Petpeswick, and ended up by spending all their time in that community and two others: East Petpeswick and nearby Ostria Lake. By a stroke of luck their first informant was Thomas Young, and he was willing to sing to them such songs as "Black Eyed Susan", "The Maid I Left Behind" and "When First Into This Country", as well as several ballads, including "The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington", "The Ship's Carpenter" and "The Rich Merchant's Daughter". The Youngs were another singing family: James Young, for example, contributed (among other songs) "The Rocks of Scilly" and "Paul Jones", while more relatives were to be found in East Petpeswick, where Doreen transcribed songs from Tom, Garvie, Freeman, Roy and Gertrude Young. Other valuable informants at East Petpeswick included Mrs. Dennis Greenough, from whom Doreen and Helen collected "Barbara Ellen", "Dark Eyed Sailor", "Lost Jimmy Whalen" and, most famously, "Farewell to Nova Scotia". In total, Doreen noted eighty-eight songs in less than a week.

Given the success of this brief expedition in 1933, one might have expected the two women to have eagerly continued their partnership whenever they had the chance. In fact, although Doreen was back in Nova Scotia in 1934, Helen was too busy with family responsibilities, and several more years passed before she once again settled down to do some serious collecting. In the Halifax/Dartmouth region she discovered Mrs. R. W. Duncan and Mrs. William McNab and even tried her hand at noting tunes as well as words from the latter. Returning to the Atlantic coast east of Halifax she located promising singers in the communities of Chezzetcook and Musquodoboit. So when Doreen arrived back in Halifax in early July 1937 Helen had a long list of places and people for them to visit. The singers included not only Mrs. Duncan, Ben Henneberry, Enos Hartlan and Tom Young but also such Chezzetcook residents as Dennis Smith and John and Walter Roast. Dennis Smith was the one of her recent discoveries whom Helen most wanted Doreen to hear, especially his rendition of "Peggy Gordon". In *A Life in Folklore* she remembered her first meeting with the Smiths as well as subsequent visits:

I crawled wearily from the car and knocked at the door. What a pleasant sight met my eyes, a dear old man sitting in a rocking chair with his gentle wife in a strait-backed chair beside him... They greeted me cordially, and I told him I heard he was a great singer of old songs. He said he'd be proud and happy to sing and that although his eyes were failing, his memory was perfect. It nearly was and if he did forget a word or line, his wife was quick to remind him. I didn't stay for more than half an hour for fear of tiring him but in that time, among other things, he had sung a rare and ancient Child ballad, "The Grey Cock"... On my next visit Mr. Smith was sitting in a chair wheezing badly, the result of a long damp spell. He said, "You should have been here last night; we had a great sing." His friend, Tom Young, had come from East Petpeswick, and they often sang together. At Christmas they would sit at a table and hold hands, swinging them to the music's rhythm. This is the way they loved to spend their leisure, singing stories in song to one another. He wasted no time being coaxed but started a song which unfolded beautifully with some lines like those in the English "Waly Waly." Words and music of "Peggy Gordon" were so lovely I was to sing them over and over to myself for years afterwards as I drove alone over country roads. Now I thought what a calamity it would be if anything happened to the old man before Doreen arrived to capture the music. 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. His range was from middle C to high G, as in the song "Nancy" on page 189 of *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*, and he embellished his tunes with grace notes and embroideries which varied with his state of mind and mood... When he forgot, he would say, "douce take it," his utmost in profanity, and often when I left he would say, "Come soon again dear. Come as often as you like, I'll always give you a couple of songs," and he was as good as his word.¹⁹

In the event Doreen was equally delighted with "Peggy Gordon" and with the Chezzetcook singers. The two women made a good team and most of their collecting went well that summer, although Doreen had an aversion to Devil's Island and spent only one day there, noting nine melodies from Ben Henneberry. On the other hand, at the lighthouse on nearby Chebucto Head the two women discovered Catherine (Mrs. Edward) Gallagher, who became a close friend as well as one of their most prolific and accomplished informants. By the end of August Doreen had added nearly two hundred tunes to their collection. Together with those previously noted in

1933 these transcriptions would provide the bulk of the songs that Creighton later published as *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*.²⁰ This third collaboration between Doreen and Helen was by far the longest and most concerted attempt the two women ever made to find old songs of British origin in Nova Scotia. The first fruit of their work was evident the next year, when Helen scripted and hosted for CBC a ten-part radio series titled "Folk Songs from Nova Scotia". The programs featured three of the principal informants from 1937: Walter Roast, Catherine Gallagher, and Edmund Henneberry substituting for his father Ben. It was followed the next year by a repeat series, featuring the same source singers, with the addition of professional singer Nina Bartley Finn.

Helen's and Doreen's fourth collecting trip took place in August 1939, during which Doreen noted another thirty melodies, mostly from Mrs. Duncan and Catherine Gallagher but also in communities along both sides of Minas Basin, north of Halifax. However, the imminent outbreak of World War II induced her to cut short her stay in Nova Scotia, and thereby brought to an effective end her partnership with Helen. On the boat back to England in 1937 she had met Douglas Kennedy, Director of the English Folk Dance & Song Society, and he now arranged for her to give a recital at Cecil Sharp House of songs she had noted in Canada. This performance, a success, led to a contract with British music publisher Novello for a dozen piano arrangements, and the result, titled *Twelve Folk Songs from Nova Scotia*, appeared in print the next year. Helen's name appeared on the cover, but the publication was hardly what she had hoped for, given the small number of songs that it contained and the lack of scholarly notes. Doreen would be equally disappointed with *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* when it finally appeared ten years later. Nonetheless, the two women did subsequently keep in touch by mail, if only episodically, and, despite Doreen's chagrin about being merely the nominal music editor of *Traditional Songs*, they would renew their friendship when they met again in England in 1959. But they never again collected folksongs together.

The Disc Recorder Decade

Creighton does not appear to have done any song collecting during the first few years of World War II, but in 1942 she received a grant to attend an Institute of Folklore at Indiana University, where she participated in seminars led by Siith Thompson, John Jacob Niles and Alan Lomax. Lomax invited her to

visit the archives of the Folklife Centre at the Library of Congress, where she also met Charles, Ruth, Pete and Mike Seeger. Best of all, Lomax lent her a Library of Congress disc recorder, and asked her to make a series of folklore recordings designed to capture different aspects of Nova Scotian cultural life during the war: songs (including those popular in the navy), stories, topical events and even musical reviews. Helen willingly interviewed naval officers and other sailors in the ports of Halifax and Yarmouth, Afro-Americans from the local black community, and aboriginal informants from a nearby Mi'kmaq reserve. She even went to Cape Breton in search of Gaelic material, although in the event she obtained more French songs from the Acadian communities at Cheticamp and Grand Etang than Scottish songs from her Gaelic-speaking contacts on the island. Helen experienced some technical difficulties with the heavy and complicated Presto disc recorder (for example, her Gaelic recordings were unsalvageable duds) and some of the records that she shipped to Washington were broken in transit. Nonetheless, the quality of most of the recordings that she made during 1943-44 was much superior to anything done earlier with the Dictaphone or the Edison phonograph. Indeed, they were probably the first listenable recordings of English Canadian traditional singers made anywhere outside a radio or recording studio. Taped copies of most of the extant discs are held in the *Creighton Fonds* at the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, although the originals presumably remain at the Library of Congress.

Of the total number of nearly five hundred items in the Creighton LC collection approximately one hundred and fifty are successful recordings made from source singers during 1943-44. It is difficult to be exact about these figures because some items were recorded more than once, quite a few discs are imperfect, broken or missing, and there appear to be some gaps in the LC listings; also one can always argue about what is and what is not a folksong, and the correct classification of some informants is debatable. Nina Bartley Finn is a case in point. Impressed with her performances of folksongs on the second CBC radio series, Helen devoted nearly thirty discs to re-recording them for posterity. She also recorded a few items from family members, neighbours and visiting servicemen.

Nonetheless, one can say with some assurance that more than a quarter of the LC recordings feature a familiar group of Helen's key informants, Mrs. Duncan, Catherine Gallagher, Enos and Richard Hartlan, Ben Henneberry, Walter Roast, and Dennis

Smith among them. Mrs. Duncan, for example, contributed fifteen songs, including “All Around My Hat”, “He’s Young But He’s Daily Growing” and a rare Child ballad, “Famous Flower of Serving Men”. Catherine Gallagher’s fifteen items included “Young Hunting”, “Henry Martyn”, “Golden Vanity”, the “Broken Ring Song”, and a rare ballad about a naval battle, “The Chesapeake and Shannon”. Ben Henneberry’s eighteen offerings were mainly traditional ballads, including “Henery” (a variant of “Lord Randal”), “False Knight on the Road”, “Cruel Mother” and “Hind Horn”, not to mention two Robin Hood ballads. Although only two songs were recorded from Enos Hartlan (“The Derby Ram” and “When I Was In My Prime”), Richard Hartlan contributed more than twenty, including his signature sea-song “The *Flying Cloud*”, “The Banks of Newfoundland”, and the Child ballad “Captain Wedderburn’s Courtship”. Walter Roast was the most recorded of all the traditional singers, with nearly thirty items from his repertoire captured for posterity, including “Farewell to Nova Scotia”, “The Ghostly Sailors”, “Lost Jimmy Whalen”, “Dark-Eyed Susan”, “Lovely Nancy” and “Spanish Ladies”. Afro-American informant William Riley’s ten songs were mainly spirituals, carols and lullabies, and they included “Auction Block”, “Go Down Moses”, “The Blessings of Mary” and one of Helen’s favourites, “The Cherry Tree Carol”. Other highlights among these discs include a set of sea shanties performed by a group of Yarmouth sea captains led by Arthur Hilton, and six songs (five of them in French) from Acadian informant Armand Mongeon. Although one regrets the absence of performances by a few of Creighton’s best informants – the various members of the Young family from Petpeswick can serve as an example – there is no question that we should be very grateful to Alan Lomax for his foresight in having Helen make these recordings.

By the time the war ended, Creighton was again bereft of recording equipment, but she was eager to continue collecting. Her attendance at the Indiana University Institute of Folklore and her visit to the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress had broadened her intellectual horizon. Folklore, she now realized, covered a lot more than traditional songs, and with the encouragement of Stith Thompson she began to collect tales and other items of folk culture.

In 1945 Helen made her first fieldtrip to Lunenburg County, visiting Tancook Island, Mahone Bay, East Le Havre, Petite Riviere and Lunenburg itself. By 1947 she had extended her reach to the Annapolis valley and to the entire “French Shore” of south-western Nova Scotia. She had also concluded that

ghost stories, which seemed to be quite common in the region, were a genre of folktale that might make a particularly interesting specialized collection. Some of the communities she visited were francophone, and she picked up the words (but unfortunately not the melodies) of a number of Acadian folksongs. That year, thanks to Marius Barbeau, she obtained her first contract as a freelance fieldworker for the National Museum, and eventually, although it took a while to negotiate, Barbeau succeeded in supplying her with another Presto disc recorder, borrowed from the Library of Congress.

The acquisition of recording equipment made it feasible for Helen to resume song collecting. She now made her first recordings in Lunenburg County. They included sea shanties sung by William Smith at Liverpool, and the first of what would prove to be an extensive body of Acadian folksongs performed by a group of residents of the francophone village of West Pubnico. The songs that Helen recorded from such informants as Mme Louis Amirault, Mme Sephora Amirault, Mme Henri Pothier and Mme Laura McNeil (among others) would form the core of her collection of Acadian songs, although she supplemented this material with other songs collected elsewhere, including Grand Étang and Chéticamp on the island of Cape Breton. Her Acadian collection would eventually be published in 1988, after a very long wait and just before Helen’s death, as *La Fleur du Rosier*, edited by Ronald Labelle. Fortunately the National Museum was much readier to facilitate the publication of Creighton’s study of the customs and culture of the Lunenburg region, and *Folklore of Lunenburg County* appeared in 1950, the same year as *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia*.

Helen also made a return visit to the community of Eastern Passage, where the Henneberry family and other Devil’s Island residents had been relocated during the war. The elderly Ben Henneberry was now past his prime as a singer, but his son Edmund still sang much of his father’s repertoire, including “The Gay Spanish Maid”, which Helen recorded at this time. According to Creighton’s own testimony, the total number of songs that she recorded on the Presto disc machine in 1948 was one hundred and fourteen, most of them in the west of the province. In her estimate that made a grand total of 357 folksongs caught on disc, not to mention the other wartime field recordings of stories, talk and Navy music.²¹

In 1949 the National Museum supplied Helen with her first tape-recorder, an early Revere model. Although heavy and somewhat unreliable, it was more portable than the old Presto disc recorder.

The Ghostly Sailors

Anon
Water Roast

The musical score is written on six staves in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "You can smile if you've a mind to, but perhaps you'll lend an ear. As boy and man together, for nigh on fifty years, I sailed in fish - ing vess - els in sum - mer's pleas - ant days And all through storm - y win - ters when the howl - ing winds did rage." The melody is simple and folk-like, with a mix of quarter and eighth notes.

You may smile if you want to, but perhaps you'll lend an ear,
For boys and girls together, well on for fifty years
I've sailed in fishing vessels, in summer's pleasant gales,
And all through stormy winters where the howling winds did rage.

I've been tossed about on Georgia Shoals, been fishing in the Bay,
Down south in early seasons, most anywhere would pay,
I've been in different vessels on the Western Banks and Grand,
I've been in herring vessels that went to Newfoundland.

There I saw storms, I tell you, and things looked rather blue,
But somehow I was lucky and quickly I got through,
I will not brag, however, I will not say so much,
I have not been easily frightened like most of other men.

Last night as we were sailing, we were sailing off the shore,
I never will forget it, in all my mortal days,
It was in the grand dog watches I felt a thrilling dread
Come over me as if I heard one calling from the dead.

Right over our rail there clambered all silent, one by one,
A dozen dripping sailors, just wait till I am done,
Their face were pale and sea worn, shone through the ghostly night,
Each fellow took his station as if he had a right.