

Lecture for Montreal schoolchildren. They were made junior members of the PQSPB and pledged to protect birds. It is estimated that about 50 000 children were “indoctrinated” and made aware of the importance of birds to the natural world. Who knows how influential these lectures were on those young people in later life?

Through the years, the PQSPB board has worked to protect birds and habitat in Quebec, often successfully. However, today collaboration with larger organizations such as The Nature Conservancy is necessary in order to be effective, and many of the early Montreal

area sanctuaries have been overwhelmed by development. Other sanctuaries in the rest of Quebec have survived, and there are occasional additions. Many well-known naturalists, scientists and “birdy people” have been associated with PQSPB throughout its history and there will be many Canadians who will be interested in reading about their contribution to bird protection.

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Farley: The Life of Farley Mowat

By James King. 2002. Harper Flamingo Canada. xvii + 398 pages.

To paraphrase a legendary literary review of a scholarly book on penguins: “This book tells us more about Farley Mowat than we ever wanted to know”. Mowat, a legendary nature chronicler and environmental activist of our time, is depicted in personal detail from cradle to aged guru in great personal detail, not sparing us his relations with two wives, librarian father, mother, and father’s mistress/second wife. The publisher assures us, and it is certainly evident in the intimate text, that author King had “unprecedented access” to Mowat, his family, other relatives, editors (notably the legendary Canadian publisher Jack McClelland, the subject of another biography by King), and others.

Mowat was born 12 May 1921. In 2001 there were, according to biographer King’s text (page 337), over 460 translations of Mowat’s work in 24 languages. In all, Mowat has authored 32 books, been editor for four others, and two collections of his work have been edited by others. Among his writings are his glimpse of Canada’s “eskimos” (Inuit) in *People of the Deer* (1952), predators in *Never Cry Wolf* (1963), the Siberian arctic in *Sibir* (1970), cetaceans in *A Whale for the Killing* (1972), the fisheries of the Atlantic in *Sea of Slaughter* (1984), as well as personal accounts of a favourite pet in *The Dog Who Wouldn’t Be* (1957), vivid impressions of military service in the Second World War in *And No Birds Sang* (1979), and his own youth in *Born Naked* (1993), and the land *Alive in a Strange Place: A Journey through the Canadian North* (2002) in King’s list; published as *High Latitudes: A Journey*.

King has presented us with a marvellously enthusiastic portrait of the self-made Mowat. As a self-appointed spokesman on behalf of endangered native people, northern mammals, and marine life, Mowat holds a uniquely prominent, but always controversial, place among popularizers of natural history. He ranks as a equal with the commercially successful fiction and non-fiction authors who brought Canadian literature to world attention over the last half of the 20th Century, but in which category has often been hotly debated. His biographer argues, reflecting Mowat’s own view, that in the broad sense Mowat writes the truth, even

though he may not strictly follow facts. His concentration is focused on holding the readers’ attention with a good story. Mowat is not unique in this. Canada has had other popular natural history writers who effectively promoted public sympathy for the environment and support for its conservation, even the legendary Ernest Thompson Seton himself, who have been suspect of some fudging in their accounts to serve a purpose.

Regrettably, King has apparently not grasped the legitimate concern that truth can be substantiated only through high standards of factual reporting. Nor has he acknowledged the credibility due to members of the mainstream scientific community who adhere to this principle. Here, they are often dismissed, detractors whose views the crusading Mowat was forced to wage a lifelong battle to surmount. However, the real tragedy of Mowat is overlooked. His great writing flair and sincere concern for the environment would likely have made his books as popular even if he had stuck to the facts; that he did not lessened their effectiveness because, whatever the truth in his crusades, they could be dismissed too easily on the basis of his errors. Typical were the comments of Fisheries and Oceans research scientist, David Sergeant, who said in a 1986 review of *Sea of Slaughter* (*Canadian Field-Naturalist* 100(1): 143-144): “Farley’s story is packed with interesting facts. The trouble is, many of them don’t hold up to critical scrutiny ... Farley’s chief fault is sheer exaggeration.”

Mowat often increased the scientific negativity toward himself by taunting his detractors. Erling Porsild (1901-1977) who wrote a scathing review of an early book, *People of the Deer*, is summarily dismissed by biographer King as “a civil servant in the Department of Natural Resources and Development”. In fact, he was a distinguished arctic field botanist and head of the National Herbarium (scientific plant collection) at the National Museum of Canada (see tribute in *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* 92(3): 298-304). Porsild once told me that some time after his review appeared he received a telegram from Mowat quoting figures to show how much the attention it had brought had increased the sales of the book. It further

informed Porsild that Mowat would be visiting Ottawa and would be at the Bytown Tavern between certain times on a certain date when he would be pleased to autograph Porsild's copy of the book in appreciation. Though Porsild passed up the opportunity, years later he still recoiled at the memory.

A. W. Frank Banfield, once Mowat's field buddy in his student days, is made out as another villain. Banfield, in fact, had not fired his old chum Mowat on his own, but had been forced to by order of his seniors in the Canadian Wildlife Service who were exasperated by Mowat spending government money without authorization, leaving his field work without due notice, and further by giving press conferences when away from his duties. Banfield's later review of *Never Cry Wolf* (1964 *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* 78(1): 52-54) was based on first-hand knowledge as the supervisor of the two-team field party, one team of which had Andrew Lawrie, a graduate biologist in charge, paired with Mowat. Mowat had loosely based the book on this experience but portrayed himself as alone. Frank (by the time of his review Chief Zoologist for the National Museum of Canada, soon to become its Director) had carefully searched the Canadian Wildlife archives to compare Mowat's account and his own memory of events with the historic record before writing his classic critique. When Mowat's reaction to the review came in the mail to him the form of a Letter to the Editor purportedly

composed by one of the study wolves, Uncle Albert, Frank passed it over to the journal. "What should we do with this?" he asked. "It's addressed to the Editor of the CFN, I replied. We publish it of course." And we did (1964 *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* 78(3): 206). Perhaps Mowat has never appreciated how many fans he really had, even among those who had to criticize him for his extravagances.

Mowat had initially started out, as have a legion of scientists-in-training, with an early paper accepted by *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* (1947 "Notes on the birds of Emma Lake, Saskatchewan" 61(3): 105-115). This, his first published writing aside from nature columns for the Saskatoon newspaper, was a careful documentation of his bird observations on part of a field expedition in the summer of 1939, taken jointly with then fellow University of Toronto student Banfield (the latter published in 1941 on Saskatchewan mammals taken on the same expedition: *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* 55(8): 117-123). Both served in the Canadian forces in World War II, and, when it concluded, were reunited for the Caribou-Wolf study then being initiated by the Canadian Wildlife Service. After that, their subsequent career tracks in natural history in Canada could hardly have diverged more.

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