

# Farley Mowat – Some Thoughts

By Rod Fraser

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*Farley Mowat during the War Years*

A GOOD FRIEND, Ron Cole, told me he met Farley Mowat many years ago. It was during a visit to Cape Breton where Farley had a summer home. Ron was

enjoying a coffee in a local diner when Farley came in and sat down at the counter. After catching Farley's eye Ron asked, "Did that dog really do everything you said in your book?"

Farley replied, "He sure did!" in a loud voice. He picked up his take-out order, paused, looked at Ron carefully and whispered hoarsely in his ear on his way out the door, "Or he should have!" Here was Farley Mowat at his best: impish, irreverent and often very witty.

I thought of the above story recently, when I happened upon one of Farley's books in a local thrift shop: *Owls in the Family* is a slim volume of just over a hundred pages. It was published in 1961. I read it later that evening.

It's a lovely story that tells of the lives of three young boys (and a dog called Mutt) on the Prairies, in the 1930s. In the book, the boys capture two young owls for pets. Their ensuing adventures are a 'hoot'. The book made me laugh and tear up from time-to-time. It is a masterpiece of storytelling.

As is another of Farley's books, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*, featuring Mutt again, and telling the story of his high jinks with his young owner. This delightful dog had extraordinary hunting skills, climbed trees and ladders, and wore goggles while

sitting in the rumble seat of the family's 'Model A' car. The book is about a simpler time, long ago during the depression, when Mutt was Farley's companion during his childhood in Saskatoon.



*Farley and Mutt during the Depression Years.*

This wasn't my first exposure to Farley's books. Many years ago, I read *The Regiment*, a memoir of The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, an Ontario Militia regiment, which saw action in Italy and Northwest Europe during the Second World War.

Farley enlisted in 'The Hasty Ps' in 1940, rose to the rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, and commanded a rifle platoon during the Italian campaign. He survived the war without injury and left the army in 1946 with the rank of Captain.

I also read Farley's other war memoir, *And No Birds Sang*, written years later in 1979. This book—which is far more revealing of Farley's emotional life during the war—was written after his father's death.

It mentioned his struggles with the unrelenting fear of combat, and what was then called 'shell shock'. These issues were never raised in his earlier book on the war, or possibly even talked about while his father was alive. His relationship with his father, Angus Mowat (1892–1977), was complicated.

I WANT TO take a moment to talk of Farley's father, who also was an officer in the 'Hasty Ps' during the war (although never sent overseas). During the First World War, Angus was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He was badly wounded in 1917 and returned home shortly thereafter.

In the years following the First War, Angus finished his Bachelor of Arts degree (through part-time studies) and became a librarian. Later, when the family lived in Saskatoon, he earned a M.A. with the University of Saskatchewan. Sir Oliver Mowat, a premier of Ontario in the late nineteenth century, was a great uncle.

Angus was a bit of a rolling stone. He worked as chief librarian in Trenton, Belleville, Windsor and Saskatoon. Then in 1937, he returned to Ontario to

take on the job of Inspector of Public Libraries for Ontario (interrupted by his war service mentioned above).

Farley recalled moving nine times during his early years. It contributed to his shy, introverted nature. His lifelong passion for dogs, wildlife and the natural world may have arisen from a lack of boyhood friends.

Angus married Helen Lillian Thomson (1896–1984) in 1919 and Farley (an only child) was born two years later. The couple later adopted two aboriginal children in the 1940s. Angus divorced Helen in 1964 and later married Barbara Hutchison (another librarian).

During his working life, Angus wrote two novels. According to Farley, “They weren’t very good and they weren’t very successful”. So he gave up on writing, concluding it was not for him.

THIS WAS CERTAINLY not true for his son. It is arguable Farley was Canada’s most successful writer. Over the course of his life, he sold more than 17 million books, translated into over 52 languages.

This included over 40 titles, including children’s fiction, memoirs and what Farley called, “subjective non-fiction”. This latter category made Farley a

controversial figure. At one point, some claimed his name should be changed to "Hardly Know-it".

One critic, John Goddard, in a 1996 article in the now-defunct *Saturday Night* magazine, claimed Farley fabricated much of his so-called evidence in *Never Cry Wolf*, *People of the Deer*, and *The Desperate People*.

Comparing the content of the books to Farley's contemporaneous field notes and journals (which Farley had sold to McMaster University), Goddard concluded Farley did not spend two years in the Keewatin District as he claimed, but "two summer field sessions in the Arctic ... totaling less than six months."

Farley did not travel alone, but was part of "well-planned scientific expeditions", of which he was a "junior member". He did not see "a starving Inuit person" and "he did not once set foot in an Inuit camp".

In an interview for Goddard's *Saturday Night* article, Farley admitted to a "certain liberty with the facts." He claimed, "The primary consideration for a writer is to entertain. Using entertainment, you can then inform, you can propagandize, you can elucidate...." Farley added, "I never let the facts interfere with the truth."

I find this a startling position for an author of non-fiction to take. No one can hope to arrive at the whole truth, let alone be clever enough to write it all down. I accept that. But non-fiction writers have some responsibility to their readers.

At a minimum, they should write their stories as honestly as they can, without inventing facts or distorting other valid points of view. Where liberties are taken, full disclosure should be the norm.

FARLEY MOWAT WAS born in Belleville in 1921, moved often during his childhood and was living in Richmond Hill with his parents when Canada declared war on Germany in 1939. As I mentioned earlier, Farley enlisted in the *Hasty Ps* in 1940 and spent five years in the Canadian Army.

Upon release from the army, Farley studied biology at the University of Toronto where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1949. During those years, in the summer months, he signed up to work in the Arctic on scientific expeditions. Here he learned about wolves, caribou and the Inuit, gaining the knowledge to write his early books on the North.

In 1947, he met Frances Thornhill who worked in the lab and they subsequently had two children. The marriage didn't last. After a number of years, they

divorced. Farley then married his companion, Claire Wheeler, a graphic designer.

Farley and Claire lived for a time in Newfoundland, but after his book, *A Whale for the Killing*, was published, they moved on. Many of the locals felt Farley's book had been too critical of their community. They resented him. The Mowats no longer felt welcome and left to find another home.

Subsequently they spent their winters in Port Hope and purchased a summer place in Cape Breton. There they spent the remaining years of Farley's life who died in 2014.

I read four of Farley's books described earlier in this article. I enjoyed them. But if you really want to experience Farley Mowat at his best, read *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* and *Owls in the Family*. They will warm your heart.

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