

Farley Mowat

1921–2014



Jack McClelland used to tell the story of how Farley first appeared in his office, a small, red-haired, wild man who wanted, more than anything, to be a writer. He thought words had the power to change the world. I think that is what he was trying to do with *People of the Deer*, the book that opened the debate about the fate of the peoples of the North, the so-called “barren lands,” which had never been barren and where greed, incompetence, and injustice passed for government policies. As Margaret Atwood wrote in her introduction to *High Latitudes*, the book “was also an X in the sand: it marked a crucial turning point in general Canadian awareness.”

IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to admit that Farley Mowat is dead. It's even harder to contribute a traditional RIP. Farley was many things to many people, but he was certainly not peaceable. He was cantankerous, argumentative, vehement, passionate, opinionated, bent on changing the world, while there was still time – and, once he concluded we had spoiled our world beyond even his capacious talents to save, he was bent on saving the remaining non-humans. In a letter to Jack McClelland, Farley had promised not “to grow old gracefully. I’m going down the drain snarling all the way.” His nickname in the army was “Squib” – “a small tube of black powder used to ignite a large explosive charge,” was how his father explained the word. Angus Mowat had been the first Mowat to have acquired the moniker and, to avoid confusion, Farley added another “b.”

I have known Farley most of my life. I have read all he has written and, like about 17 million other people, I am a fan. I was also one of his critical readers and, eventually, his publisher.

I first met him when I was a very junior editor-general dogsbody working for the legendary Jack McClelland. He was, of course, Farley’s publisher and, most of the time, his best friend. They laughed, told tales to each other, played tricks together, shared memories of a devastating war they both entered as children, and both left as wary, bloodied adults. At first, I thought it was the war that brought them together, but after reading *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float*, I knew that it was the desire to find life hilariously funny, because otherwise it would be horribly sad.

AND NO BIRDS
SANG

FARLEY
MOWAT



"A devastating
memoir... brilliant."

JOSEPH BOYDEN

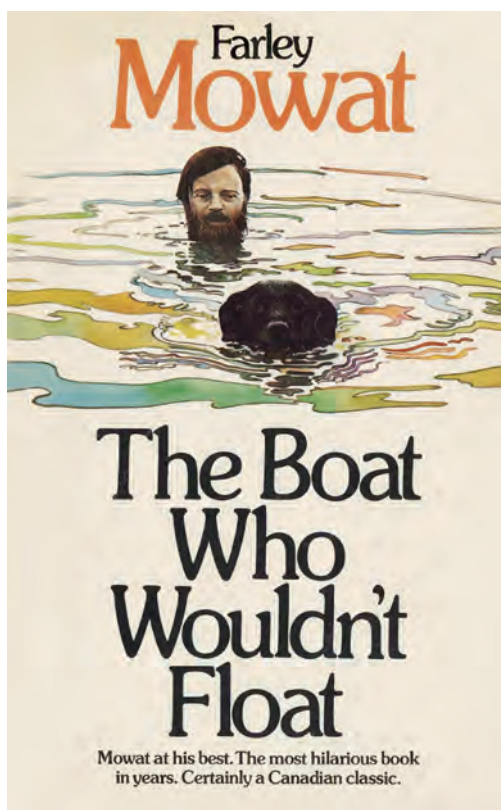
FARLEY HAD SERVED in the “Hasty P’s,” a.k.a. Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, battling its way up through Sicily, then the rest of Italy, through rivers of blood. He lost most of his friends and found himself “staring down a vertiginous tunnel where all was black and bloody and the great wind of ultimate desolation howled and hungered.” That’s from the final pages of *And No Birds Sang*, the “book about coming of age in a world gone mad.” Even then, he tried to balance the horror with writing about Mutt, who would become the hero of *The Dog Who Wouldn’t Be*, my

children’s (when they were very young) favourite Mowat book. They were enchanted when he asked them to dance at John Irving’s son’s wedding. He loved to be with children, and he was a vigorous dancer who looked splendid in his kilt.

When I met him in 1969, at McClelland & Stewart’s grungy offices on Hollinger Road, he marched down the gloomy corridor, saying hello to everyone he saw and hugging Marge Hodgeman, Jack’s exceptionally efficient secretary (who wrote some of his letters, and signed them as well). By then, the *Boat* was an international bestseller, and Farley – who, unlike most authors, didn’t like advances on his new books – had something to celebrate. As did Jack, though that was at a time when publishing was not yet a guarantee of a pre-

carious existence. Still, the two men managed to get into a loud argument, which may have had something to do with the fact that Jack had recently realized that the *Boat* made him look silly and somewhat pretentious and that Farley was enjoying how everyone laughed at Jack’s blundering.

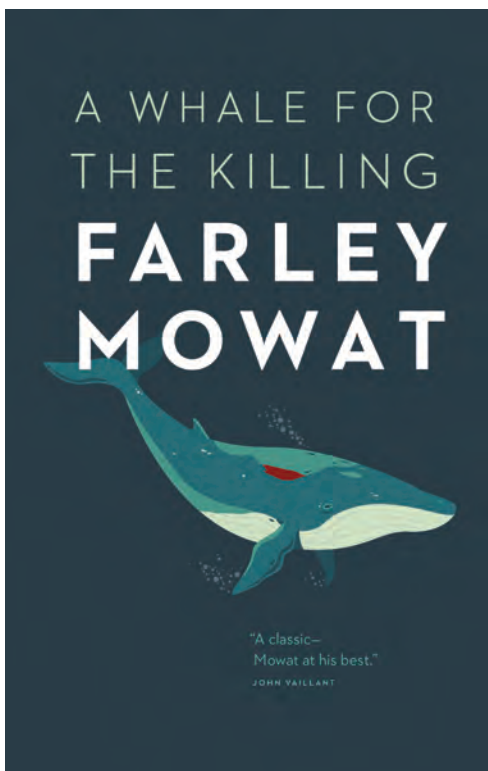
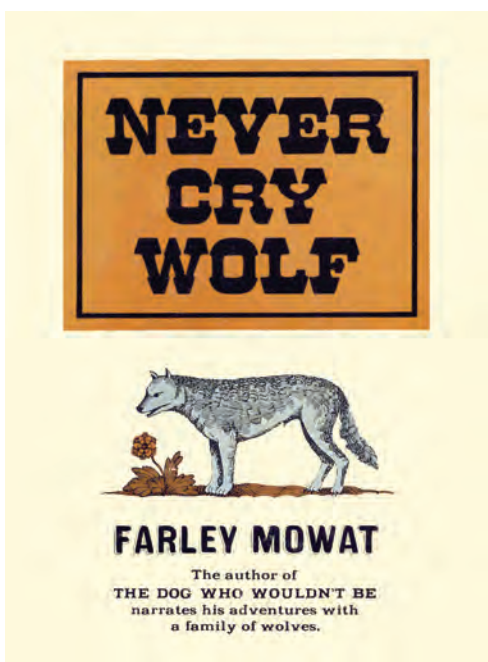
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Farley’s first battle with me was over his manuscript *Sibir: My Discovery of Siberia*, about his travels in the bowels of the USSR during the coldest time of the Cold War. His book *Never Cry Wolf* had been published in Russian with the title *Wolves, Please Don’t Cry*, and it raised such a public ruckus that the government decreed a moratorium on wolf hunting. At least that was Farley’s story. The killing of wolves was not banned in North America. He was much in love with Russians, and I was a survivor of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Jack had entertained the quaint notion that we would engage in a fruitful and mutually rewarding discussion. Instead, we yelled at each other and retired into sullen silence. It’s amazing that we managed to talk to each other for another forty years.

But talk we did. I was devastated by the fate of the *Whale for the Killing* and insisted on republishing his *Sea of Slaughter*, the book that should have raised alarms worldwide – instead the slaughter continues. I told Farley I thought the book would become required reading in schools.



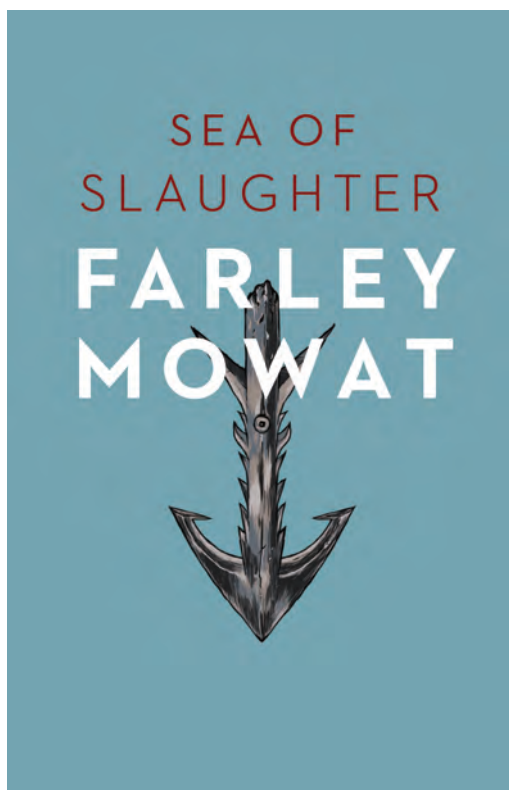
PEOPLE
OF THE DEER

**FARLEY
MOWAT**



Perhaps the next generation could do what ours had failed to do. Needless to say, those who choose the few books for schools didn't even consider the idea. When I mentioned the new edition to Farley, we were in the house he shared with Claire in Cape Breton.

"I haven't been able to change one goddamn thing," Farley declared sadly. "I thought I could make a real difference, force people to see what I see. Devastation. Death. We're dying in our own waste. Killing everything." We walked along the shore of the inlet below their home. A few curious seals peeked at us from a safe distance. The Mowats' lab, Chester, ran half-heartedly after seagulls. "*Sea of Slaughter* was too dark, maybe. Too grim. Once they put it down, people wouldn't pick it up again."



Douglas & McIntyre

THE LAST TIME I saw him was in Port Hope, their winter cottage, just a couple of weeks before he died. Feisty and garrulous as ever, Farley was furious that Paul Watson hadn't been able to come back to Canada. Watson is the environmental activist who had named his ship the *Farley Mowat* and steered it into confrontations with sealers on the ice floes for the annual slaughter. For the last couple of years, Farley couldn't go along on the journey. Then, he talked about his legacy of the approximately 200 acres of unspoilt Cape Breton land to the Nova Scotia Nature Trust. Perhaps it would remain the one piece of Canada not destroyed by man. He didn't mention his other legacy: the more than 40 books he had written. He was typing his next manuscript on the ancient manual typewriter he had used since I first met him.

ANNA PORTER is an author, journalist, and former book publisher. Her most recent book is *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys through Central Europe's Troubled Past and Uncertain Future* (Douglas & McIntyre). She has recently been writing about Central Europe for *Maclean's* and the *Globe and Mail*.

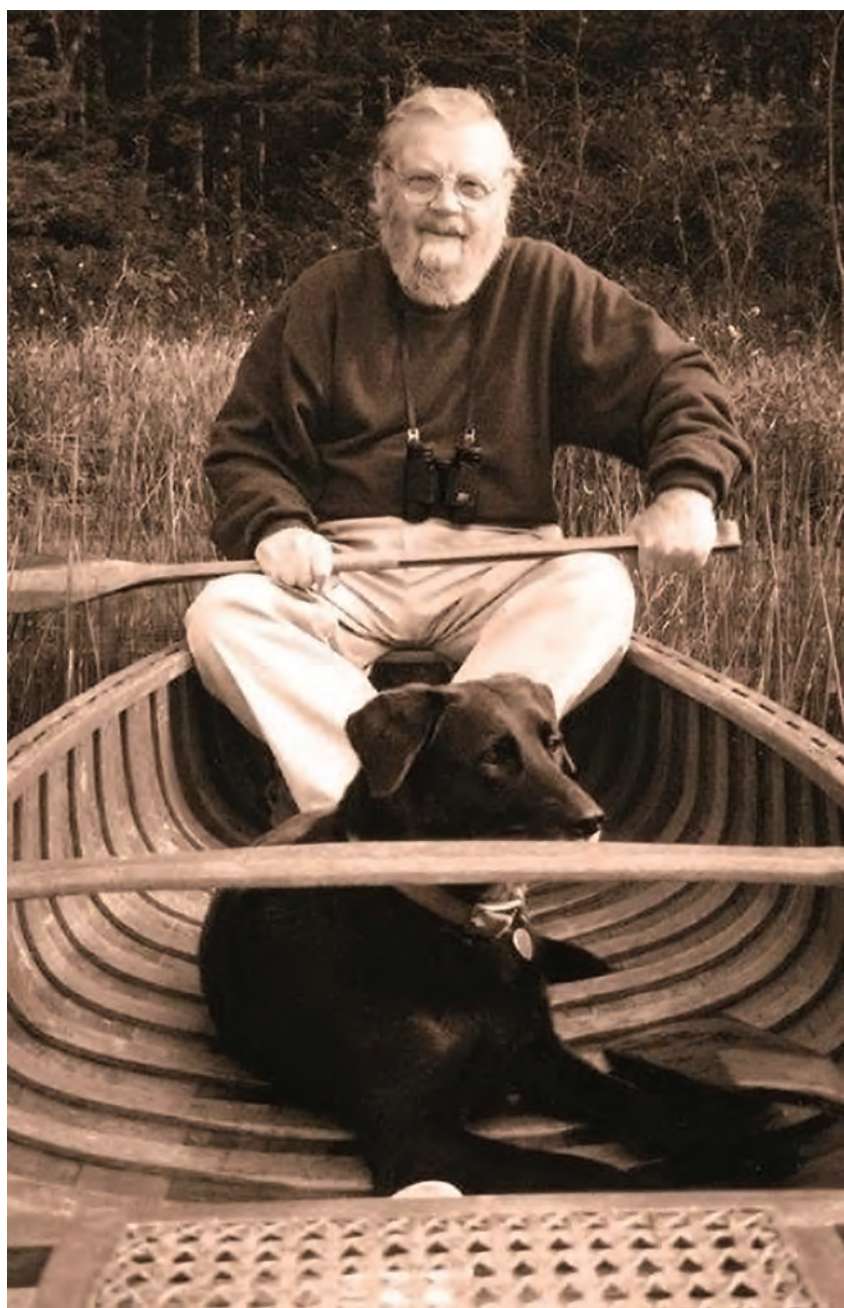


IMAGE BY CLAIRE MOWAT