

THE LEGACY OF FARLEY MOWAT by Ken McGoogan
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The recent death of Farley Mowat at 92 sparked heartfelt reminiscences and stirred up old controversies. But the most interesting question, going forward, concerns legacy. Some of us contend that Mowat was a giant. For starters, we cite numbers: 45 books, 60 countries, and (ballpark) 15 million copies sold. But if, as a writer, Mowat was a Gulliver in Lilliput, and not just commercially, then surely he left a legacy? He must have established or advanced some literary tradition? Profoundly influenced younger Canadian writers?

The answer is an emphatic yes. Born May 12, 1921, Mowat energized not only the Baby Boomers, my own generation, but younger writers. Before going further, a clarification: as a Canadian, Mowat is often linked with Pierre Berton, who was born ten months before him. Both were prolific, larger-than-life personalities published by Jack McClelland. Both wrote mainly nonfiction.

But Berton, who cut his professional teeth as a journalist, became famous for sweeping Canadian histories: *The National Dream*, *The Invasion of Canada*, *Vimy*, *The Great Depression*, *The Arctic Grail*. Contemporary Canadian historians who achieve readability while tackling big themes are working in a tradition established by Berton and Peter C. Newman (*The Canadian Establishment*, *Company of Adventurers*). Think of Margaret Macmillan and *Paris, 1919*, or of Christopher Moore and *1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal*. Think of such military historians as Tim Cook, Mark Zuelke, and Ted Barris.

Farley Mowat did not write history. He took a keen interest in prehistory, in archaeology and legend, and so produced *West-Viking* and *The Farfarers*. But looking back at his long career in context, we discover that Mowat was Canada's first writer of creative nonfiction (CNF).

The genre has been succinctly defined: "true stories, well told." Its hallmark is engagement: personal presence or voice. Celebrated early practitioners include Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Joan Didion. But Farley Mowat started publishing in 1952, some fifteen years before these American figures emerged, largely from the "new journalism."

Mowat had studied neither history nor literature. He had trained not as a journalist but as a biologist. He had no veteran writer at his shoulder, offering advice. When in the late 1940s, as a twenty-something environmentalist, Mowat sat down to cobble a book together, he was alone in the dark. He wrote because he felt deeply about the North, about the people and the wildlife he had recently encountered.

Driven by passion, and drawing on his extraordinary fluency, he produced *The People of the Deer* -- a powerful indictment of government mistreatment of the Inuit. Did he exaggerate and make mistakes? Yes, he did. Did he commit what today we regard as authorial sins? Again: yes. But Mowat was finding his way in a wilderness, pioneering a new genre of writing, one he called "subjective nonfiction."

Today, nobody uses that term. Writers, editors and critics lean to literary, narrative, or creative nonfiction (CNF). Over the past 60 years, through trial and error and countless furious arguments, we have hammered out a set of conventions. The writer of creative nonfiction enters into a contract with the reader. You agree

to tell the truth. You don't change dates, places, or other facts. You don't invent characters. You draw on research, memory, and imagination, and you use all the technical skill you command to tell your true story.

As these conventions emerged, Mowat evolved and worked within them. To survey his body of work is to witness the development of a major writer. The rough carpentry of *People of the Deer* gives way to the equally searing but masterful *Sea of Slaughter*. Down through the decades, while remaining true to his singular vision, Mowat displayed an astonishing versatility. His permutations and combinations represent a master class in the possibilities of creative nonfiction. He did trail-blazing work in a variety of subgenres that other Canadian writers have taken up and developed: environmental polemic, autobiography/memoir, political polemic, exploration narrative, adventure travel, cultural advocacy, cross-gender biographical narrative, the man never stopped writing.

Mowat's environmental polemics include *Never Cry Wolf*, *A Whale for the Killing*, and *Sea of Slaughter*. All three inspired films. The first, published more than 50 years ago, crosses the line into fictionalizing and today would not pass muster as nonfiction. It drew acclaim and sparked controversy in Canada, and in translation, prompted Russia to change its laws regarding wolf culling.

In *A Whale For the Killing*, Mowat relates his losing battle to rescue a trapped whale from hunters who laughed to kill it. And *Sea of Slaughter* (1984), probably the most powerful of Mowat's indictments, reviews in vivid detail the way we humans have devastated birds, whales, and animal life along the Atlantic coast of North America.

With these books, Mowat cleared the way for John Vaillant (*The Golden Spruce*); Maude Barlow (*Blue Future: Protecting Water for People and the Planet Forever*); Taras Grescoe (*Bottomfeeder*); J.B. MacKinnon (*The Once and Future World*); Wayne Grady (*Bringing Back the Dodo*); and Andrew Westoll (*The Chimps of Fauna Sanctuary*).

Turning to memoir/autobiography, CNF'S most popular subgenre, Mowat displayed an extraordinary breadth of subject matter and mood. His harrowing evocations of life in the trenches during the Second World War (*The Regiment*, *And No Birds Sang*) contrast sharply with the comic misadventures that drive such works as *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* and *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float*. His spectrum, from the profoundly moving to the hilarious, anticipates books ranging from Ian Brown's *The Boy in the Moon* to Will Ferguson's light-hearted *Canadian Pie*, and from the darkness of Jan Wong's *Out of the Blue* to the whimsy of Paul Quarrington's *The Boy on the Back of the Turtle*.

Mowat produced ferocious political polemics. The best-known is probably *My Discovery of America*, which he wrote after being barred from entering the United States. In this sub-genre, his heirs include Naomi Klein (*The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*); Linda McQuaig (*Billionaire's Ball: Gluttony and Hubris in an Age of Epic Inequality*); Stephen Kimber (*What Lies Across the Water: The Real Story of the Cuban Five*); and Lawrence Martin (*Harperland: The Politics of Control*).

While he was at it, Farley Mowat "invented" the Canadian North -- certainly in terms of global awareness, but also for many Canadians. In 1952, when he published *The People of the Deer*, readers around the world said, what? Canada includes an Arctic dimension? And people actually live in it? In a distinctive manner? Mowat drove this message home across three CMF sub-genres: exploration narrative,

adventure travel, and cultural advocacy. Books like *Coppermine Journey* and *Ordeal by Ice* cleared the way for *Frozen in Time: The Fate of the Franklin Expedition* by John Geiger and Owen Beattie, and for my own *Fatal Passage* and *Race to the Polar Sea*.

Mowat's works of adventure travel found him ranging widely, from the north (*High Latitudes: An Arctic Journey*) to the European continent (*Aftermath: Travels in a Post-War World*). His Canadian heirs include Charles Montgomery (*The Last Heathen*); Will Ferguson (*Beyond Belfast*); Charles Wilkins (*Walk to New York*); Karen Connelly (*Burmese Lessons*); Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds (*Breakfast at the Exit Café*); Myrna Kostash (*Bloodlines: A Journey into Eastern Europe*); and J.B. MacKinnon (*Dead Man in Paradise*).

Mowat's works of cultural advocacy, from *People of the Deer* through *Death of a People* and *No Man's River*, opened the road for Ronald Wright (*Stolen Continents*), Tom King (*The Inconvenient Indian*); Daniel Francis (*The Imaginary Indian*); John Ralston Saul (*A Fair Country*); Richard Wagamese (*One Native Life*); Wade Davis (*The Wayfinders*); and Kenn Harper (*Give Me My Father's Body*).

The master's adventure in cross-gender biographical narrative, *Virunga: The Passion of Dian Fossey*, encouraged Charlotte Gray's book about Alexander Graham Bell (*Reluctant Genius*) and my own about the wife of Sir John Franklin (*Lady Franklin's Revenge*). Yes, we Canadian writers of CNF are all in this man's debt.

Farley Mowat never stopped working, never stopped sharing his vision, his passion, and his literary gifts. He kept blazing trails, opening up one new path after another. His death has turned us into a first posterity, called upon to render judgment. On the one hand, we have a few rookie-writer mistakes that are 50 and 60 years old. On the other, we discover this marvellous legacy, still just launching. For those who read and write creative nonfiction, the decision is a no-brainer. Farley Mowat, R.I.P. We will not see your like again.