

HOW FARLEY MOWAT CHANGED MY LIFE

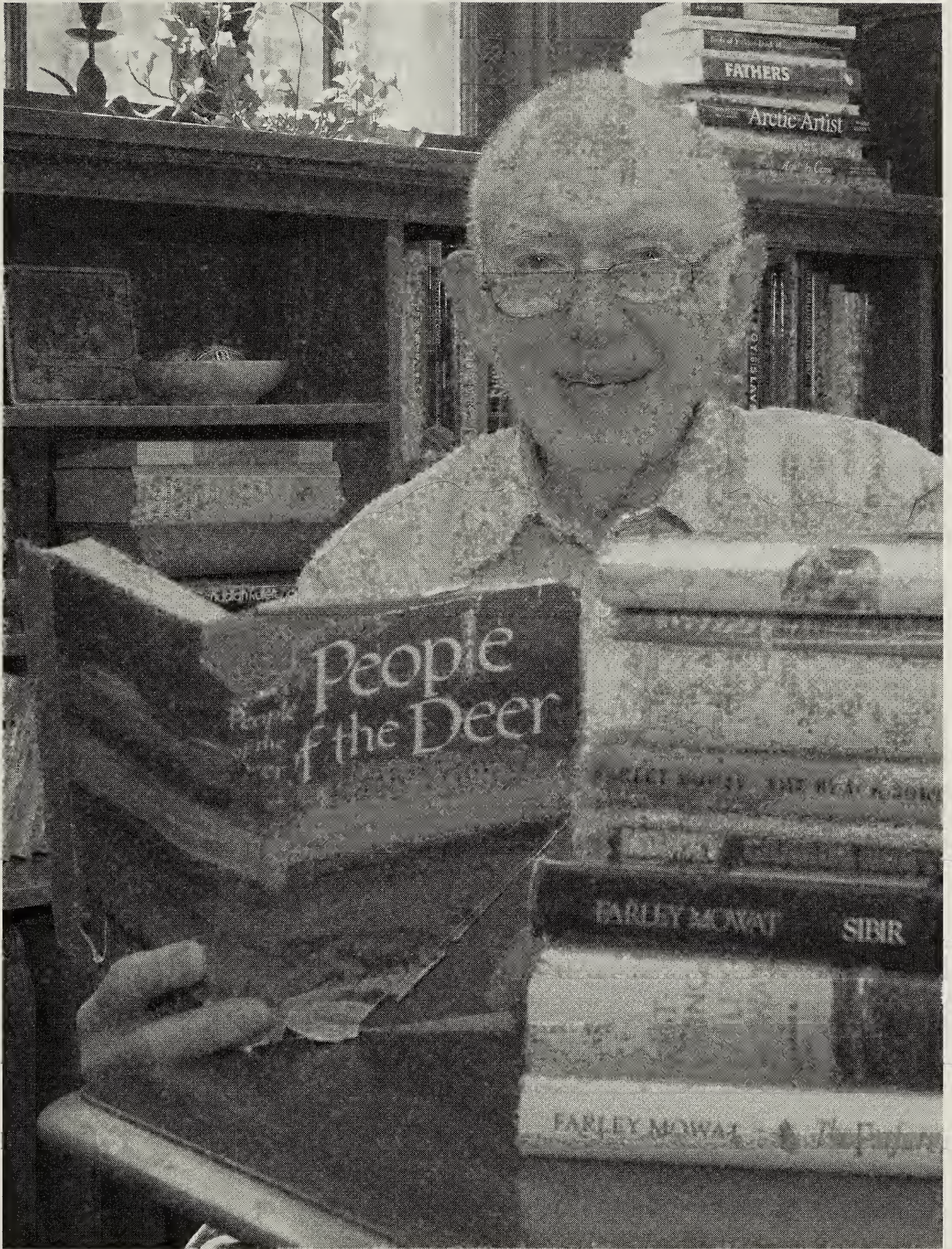
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Farley Mowat, newly demobilized from the Canadian Army after World War Two, used his Canadian Army gratuities to purchase an open Jeep. He headed west in 1946 to gather material for his planned work, the *Birds of Saskatchewan*. A veteran of one pre-war collecting trip for the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology (ROMZ), Mowat this time had only his expenses paid in return for collecting additional specimens for the museum.

Before he came west, Mowat wrote to Mrs. Isabel M. Priestly, the founder (four years earlier) and first editor of the *Blue Jay*. Each of Farley's letters and envelopes were "banged off" on his antiquated typewriter. His introductory letter of 26 March 1946, which contained 50 cents for a year's subscription to *Blue Jay*, contained his promise to come to Yorkton that summer. His goal was to write the definitive *Birds of Saskatchewan*, and to share with Canadians the importance of Dr John Richardson. Mrs Priestly shared her delight at this prospect with her family and with her friends J.R. Foreman and Ethel Lloyd, but she died suddenly of an unexpected and unfortunate cerebral hemorrhage on 23 April.

Mowat's 1946 field diary, still on extended loan, reveals that he collected specimens in the Dundurn area from 8 to 30 May, the Montreal Lake area from 3 June to 14 July and then arrived at Yorkton in his open Jeep on 17 July. Following Isabel Priestly's untimely death, Mowat had to settle for a sharing of plans with me, a young lad not yet nineteen. My summer employment was my fourth year of banding ducks for Ducks Unlimited; I had just been accepted into first year medicine at the University of Manitoba. Mowat declined Dr Sigga Houston's offer of a bedroom upstairs at 82 Fourth Avenue, Yorkton; he preferred to place his folding camp cot in the one basement room that sported a wooden floor, the meeting room for the Eagle Patrol of the Third Yorkton Troop of Boy Scouts of Canada, and my mimeographing office. That room became his bird-skinning room for preparation of scientific study skins. He stayed for three nights.

Mowat was much the most interesting character I had met – and he kept up irregular contact with me until his death on 7 May 2014. My front-page interview and page two photograph with Mowat's books in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* two days later,



Stuart Houston enjoying one of Farley Mowat's books - Stuart Houston
was followed by my interview on Mowat's birthday, 12 May on Global Television, shared nationwide. Writing from the entertaining interface between his true experiences and his imagination, Mowat had become one of Canada's most successful authors. When Mary Houston was presented with the Douglas

Pimlott award at the Canadian Nature Federation (now called Nature Canada) meeting in Yellowknife on 2 July 1988, she told the appreciative audience that when accosted by Pimlott at a soiree in Toronto, following publication of *Never Cry Wolf*, Farley had replied, "Doug, I don't bother with the facts; I just tell the truth." Later, Farley had written the foreword to *Birds of the Saskatoon Area*, in 2002, saying that it was in Saskatoon that he "first discovered birds" and simultaneously was "first discovered by the birds."

In 1924, when Hedley Horace Mitchell wrote his succinct *Catalogue of the Birds of Saskatchewan*, published as an entire issue of *Canadian Field-Naturalist* (with a few hundred copies distributed by the Saskatchewan government as a separate 18-page booklet entitled *Birds of Saskatchewan*),¹ he had credited Thomas Blakiston, magnetic observer with the Palliser expedition, as the first person to study birds in Saskatchewan. Mowat indignantly told me when we first met in 1946 that Mitchell had been unaware of Dr John Richardson, who had become Mowat's hero. Aply assisted by Thomas Drummond, Richardson had first described to science 14 new species or subspecies of

birds from Carlton House and 10 from Cumberland House.

What an exciting three days I had with Farley in his Jeep, in place of my usual bicycle, making daily rounds to each of a dozen duck traps at the two Rousay Lakes and visiting Leech and Crescent Lakes. I took a photograph of Mowat at a Northern Harrier nest in water and we visited nests of an American Bittern and several Black-crowned Night Herons. All the while, Mowat regaled me with stories.

I had no inkling at the time that the stimulus from his visit would set up unrecognized ripples that, against all expectations or statistical odds, washed up on the beach of my existence time and time again, into my old age.

Following four years of family practice with my parents in Yorkton, I wished to improve my skills as a family practitioner. In 1955, I began additional training in the exciting new and altruistic milieu of the recently-opened University Hospital: Internal medicine under Dr. Irwin Hilliard and pediatrics under Dr. John Gerrard. While there, with a wife and two small children, I received a catalogue from bookseller John Johnson in North Bennington, Vermont. Most of his used books

sold for five or ten dollars, but the item that caught my attention was “Richardson, John. *Fauna Boreali-Americana, Vol. 2, the Birds*,”² [hereafter, *FBAm2*], in good condition, at \$45. Relative to my monthly income of \$150, \$45 was a lot of money. It seems that none of Johnson’s nearest customers whose catalogue had reached them earlier, had felt they could afford it. But Mowat had set the stage and, fortunately, I have an understanding wife.

When the precious book arrived soon after Christmas 1955, I found it even more exciting than Mowat had indicated. It seemed that I was now the owner of the only copy of the book in Saskatchewan. Mary and I were spurred to spend every second weekend studying the birds at Carlton.

I also studied the extent to which Joseph Sabine, in his Appendix to Franklin’s first journey in 1823,³ missed describing valid new species and how he compounded the felony by usurping credit that Richardson would otherwise have earned. I also noted which species lost their taxonomic priority through the nearly two-year delay caused by William Swainson’s attempts to force bird classification into the soon-discredited Quinary classification -- which wasted 129 pages in the 501-page *FBAm2*. On the positive side,

William Swainson had introduced in 1820 the use of lithographic techniques for depicting birds which allowed “a more lifelike depiction of plumage, ... increased the accuracy, ... [and was] considerably less expensive.”⁴ For *FBAm2*, Swainson wrote descriptions of some of the new species and painted 50 colour plates of birds.

Mary and I returned from Yorkton on 30 December 1956 to take the first of two Christmas Bird Counts at Carlton, to see what changes had occurred in winter bird life since Richardson’s visits there in 1820 and 1827. Three cars containing four birders from Prince Albert, five from Saskatoon and two from Yorkton gathered to amass 13 ½ hours on foot and 13 hours by car and record 643 individuals of 20 species. The following winter, Margaret Belcher from Regina, three birders from Saskatoon and two from Yorkton, recorded 15 species on 29 December 1957. Later, In 1969, we took the relatively new winter road to Cumberland House, to join Dr Stan Riome and his son David of Nipawin, with Doug Whitfield, my two youngest sons, and Raymond Bisha. We did 25 miles by car and 32 miles with Carriere dog teams and recorded 14 species. On 2 January 1971, we had Vern Gunnlaugson and Stan Shadick with us, again with

Dr Riome, and did 6 miles by foot and 27 miles by car, sighting 21 species.

These CBCs have a double Mowat connection. He had not only aroused my interest in taking CBCs at former Richardson haunts at Carlton and Cumberland House, but when he was a 14-year old grade nine student Mowat undertook the first-ever Saskatoon CBC with his school chum, Bruce Billings. Their Christmas Bird Count on December 22, 1935 recorded 37 birds of 8 species during five miles' travel on foot and three miles by dog-sled, south of the city. The next winter the same two covered nine miles south along the river, partly on snowshoes and partly by dog-team, and saw 144 individuals of 11 bird species. Both of Mowat's counts were published in the *Canadian Field-Naturalist* and in the *Blue Jay*.

Saskatchewan's Golden Jubilee Year, 1955, saw the realization of the long-term dream of a new provincial museum building, officially opened by Governor General Vincent Massey on 18 May. It was the culmination of years of competent preparation by the first three museum directors, "the three Freds": Bradshaw in 1928, Dunk in 1935 and Bard in 1947,⁵ together with gentle

but persistent reminders to government from the young Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS). The million-dollar building was even larger than we had dared hope for, but our reminders had convinced Premier Tommy Douglas to make this building the government's most tangible jubilee gift "dedicated to the honour of all the Pioneers who came from many lands to settle in this part of Canada."⁶ With the new building came the appointment of Doctor Bob Nero as assistant director.⁷

Nero soon proposed what seemed improbable to local naturalists. He proposed the new museum building as an ideal location for an annual meeting of the august ornithological group which had never yet met in western Canada. The Saskatchewan delegation to the AOU meeting in Denver, Colorado in September 1956, to present a formal "attractive invitation" to a Regina meeting in 1959, consisted of Bob Nero, George Ledingham, Bernie Gollop and Stuart and Mary Houston. I gave a talk describing the birds of Carlton in the 1820s.⁸

The first American Ornithologists' Union meeting in Western Canada began in Regina 26 August 1959. Part of the registration package was an autographed copy of

Birds of the Saskatchewan River, Carlton to Cumberland, which had appeared in print five days before.⁹ In it, I had compared the bird life in the 1820s and 1850s with that of a hundred years later. Maurice Street's provision of his lifetime bird records for the Nipawin area, with more nests found by a single observer than for any other area of that size in Canada, made him an equal contributor. I gave a talk about Richardson's assistant naturalist, Thomas Drummond. The meeting had a high attendance of 391, including a much-larger-than-average local area attendance of 112 from Saskatchewan and a keen group of teen-age birders.¹⁰

I soon arranged with the Museum of Natural History in London, England, to make photographic copies (before the days of electrostatic copies) of the sequential pages of *The Ibis* which contained the bird observations of Thomas Blakiston, magnetic observer with Palliser in 1857-1859.¹¹ Most of Blakiston's bird studies, like those of Richardson, were made at Carlton House. Blakiston's collections and observations, also prior to Caucasian settlement, corroborated those of three decades earlier Richardson and his assistant naturalist, Thomas Drummond.

When Mary and I visited the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) in Winnipeg, she shared equally in the transcription and editing. We wore white gloves when transcribing the original fur trading post journals (today, one is given a microfilm instead). This was possible only because Dr Bill Ewart had in 1964 initiated the campaign to have these precious records repatriated to Canada; the transfer was finally made in 1974.¹² Had these journals remained at the Hudson's Bay Company headquarters in London, England, we would not have felt able to afford so much time there. We checked the journals for each fur trading post visited by Richardson, Douglas, and Drummond, and noted arrival dates of Canada Geese each spring.

In 1966, I attended the International Congress of Ornithology in Oxford. With my wife and Margaret Belcher, my sister-in-law, our family spent two weeks following the trail of John Richardson around Britain from Dumfries and Gosport to the Lake Country. More detailed sleuthing was yet to come.

I next achieved what should have been impossible. I located

in turn the unpublished diaries of Franklin's three officers. Through Ruth Horlick, whose maiden name was Hood, I learned that Robert Hood's journal and paintings were owned by a descendant in Surrey, BC. In 1819, when painted by Hood, five of those bird species had not yet been described to science!¹³ Next I learned through Dr Robert Johnson that John Richardson's unpublished diary had been purchased at auction in London and was now in the rare book room at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Librarian Mary Ceibert, a 1935 graduate of the University of Saskatchewan, greeted us with open arms and with small piles of published Richardsoniana.¹⁴ The final officer's journals, George Back's, we located at the McCord Museum in Montreal and the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, England, but Back's original paintings, unknown to academe, had been secretly deposited in a safe deposit vault out in Stroud, Gloucestershire. The three journals and the two sets of artist's paintings were published at ten-year intervals (Houston 1974, 1984, 1994).

The most interesting aspects of our searches are chronicled in pages xxvi to xxv in the final volume of my arctic trilogy.¹⁵ Enthusiasm, coupled with a

"digging instinct," allowed a doctor-naturalist to find and publish all three journals. The indifference of professional historians had left the field wide open. The reward: Without taking any classes and without paying tuition, I was awarded a D. Litt. degree from the University of Saskatchewan in 1987, even before *Arctic Artist* appeared in print. The degree was bestowed on me at convocation by my colleague, Dr Sylvia Fedoruk, who by then was the University chancellor. [She told me that I must hug her during the rehearsal, but not on stage.] I wrote the definitive assessment of Richardson's ornithological achievements for the Nuttall Society's third volume dealing with North American ornithology history.¹⁶ I also assisted Richard Davis of the University of Calgary with his editing of the extant journals written by Captain John Franklin himself on the first two expeditions.¹⁷ (Davis 1995, 1999). These various studies occupied much time, intermittently, for over fifty years.

Through editing the original handwritten diaries of Franklin's three officers, during the First Franklin Arctic Land Expedition, I had put together Richardson's "dates and places," some of which were not previously available in any single source. On occasion, such

dates allow one for the first time to understand the whereabouts of important specimens. Even though the story of the first Latin names given to new species may prove boring to some general readers, they were part of Mowat's original goal. When *Blue Jay* readers purchase the two-volume *Birds of Saskatchewan*, a year or more from now, I predict the number of times the names of Richardson, Hood or Drummond appear will be a revelation to many. For this I give thanks to Farley.

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5. Bard F (1955) *Blue Jay* 13(3): 10, 15.

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11. Blakiston T (1857) Notes of a naturalist on his passage towards the far west. *Zoologist* 15:5840-5843.

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