

# 'We're social cripples,' says Farley Mowat

By Jenny Pearson

Farley Mowat, visiting London with his wife Clare to publicize a fistful of his books recently launched on the British paperback market, cut an unlikely figure against the hushed opulence of Quaglino's Hotel in the West End. The direct manner, straight into first names and no nonsense, the springy sailor's stride, the offer of coffee in a cup rinsed at the basin — "We've only just had breakfast" — had us down to essentials in a moment.

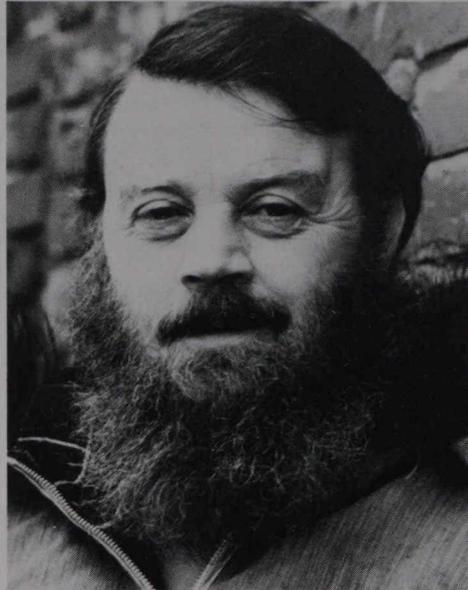
That's his way with people, with situations, with words. It's deceptive, because he can have you believing that you are reminiscing by a prairie camp fire or on the quarterdeck of a ship, old friends, when actually you have just walked into his hotel, a complete stranger, some 10 minutes back.

That's the style of which best-selling novels are made. Once into a Mowat novel — and it doesn't take more than a couple of sentences to get in — you are into willing suspension of disbelief in a big way. You don't even realize you have been taken over: the sentences follow one another with a kind of inevitability. When he is being funny, the humour bubbles up with a kind of internal logic which keeps you laughing and laughing and looking for more.

Take his story of a character called Aaron Poole, who features with the author's father in a reminiscence dating back to Mowat's childhood on the prairies, in the funniest of all his books, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*.

## The way Aaron felt

"Aaron was a withered and eagle-featured little man who emigrated from the Maritime Provinces some thirty years earlier and who, for twenty-nine years, had been hungering for the sound and feel of salt water under a vessel's keel. The fact that he had originally come from the interior of New Brunswick and had never actually been to sea in anything larger than a row-boat during his Maritime years was not relevant to the way Aaron felt. As a Maritimer, exiled on the prairies, he believed himself to be of one blood with the famous seamen of the north Atlantic ports; and in twenty-nine years a man can remember a good many things that ought to have happened. Aaron's memory was so excellent that he could talk for hours of the times when he had sailed out of Lunenburg for the Grand Banks, first as cabin boy, then as an able-bodied seaman, then as mate,



and finally as skipper of the smartest fishing schooner on the coast."

As the story goes on, Aaron builds a large boat in his basement, builds it very badly and caulks it with liberal quantities of putty: its improbable journey down river with Aaron and Mowat's father aboard could not be funnier if they had been specially scripted for Messrs. Laurel and Hardy. Likewise, the descriptions of his dog, Mutt, hero of the book, fence-walking to the discomfiture of neighbours' cats and the fury of their most fearsome dogs in the yards below: one is left wondering, *could* it have happened quite as funnily as that? The answer to this unworthy thought is that like Aaron's fabulous sea memories, if it didn't happen, it ought to have done.

Humour is only one aspect of Farley Mowat's prolific writing. He has written 23 books, fiction and non-fiction, which have been translated in 20 languages and published in 40 countries. Some are autobiographical, others are based on careful and intensive study of a subject that interests and concerns him: he has written about Eskimos and Indians, about wolves and whales, in terms of passionate protest against the damaging side-effects of "progress". The Eskimos have given him the affectionate nickname of "Kipmetna", which loosely translated means "noisy little dog", on account of his angry protests on their behalf.

He has a habit of disappearing for months, or even years, into one or other of the earth's remotest corners and then coming up with a first-hand account of some unfamiliar way of life — like the tough heroism of a Newfoundland sailing com-

munity, depicted in his graphic book about deep-sea salvage men, *The Grey Seas Under*; like *People of the Deer*, his first book, about Ihalmiut Eskimos, with whom he lived for two years on the Barrens.

His first visit to the Arctic resulted in the publication in 1959 of *The Desperate People*, a book about the plight of the Eskimos which combined with a nationwide campaign through the media to bring about government action on behalf of the native people of the North.

He recalls the crusade and its practical outcome with characteristic humour, not unmingled with irony, as it now seems that the rescue operation he helped to launch may in effect result in the destruction of those aspects of Eskimo life he admired and even, in a way, envied. He says that where, in the fifties, he found "almost no Government: just the Hudson's Bay Company and a handful of RCMP", the government has now moved in "en masse".

"Now the government probably has more bureaucrats in the Arctic than there are Eskimos. The standard joke is that an Eskimo family consists of the mother, father, three children, one sociologist and one bureaucrat".

A recent book of short stories, *The Snow Walker*, celebrates the ingenuity and courage with which Eskimos as he has known them survive in a perpetual struggle against their environment. Now, he says: "They are becoming more and more like us. Whether that's a good thing, I don't know. It's up to them, if they want to be second-class men on the progress train bound for destruction."

What is the alternative? Isn't it a bit unrealistic, to expect them to opt romantically for a life of hardship?

Mowat puffs at his pipe, reflecting, and replies; "There is a middle way. They can use certain aspects of our technology and still retain the essence of their own way of life. Like the Thule people in northern Greenland: *they* still live in the country, but they have modern equipment and use helicopters for their medical needs. At the same time, they live in discreet little tribal groups and eat the food of the country and are very healthy people".

## Despairing view

He is entirely serious in his belief that the life-style of small communities, which he has discovered and shared with different groups in the Arctic and in Newfoundland, is what people were really designed for: that civilization as we know it has alienated us from our true selves. It is a fairly despairing view and one that stands out oddly against all the razmataz of a book promotion tour. He copes by maintaining an ironical detachment and laughing at himself in the role of best-selling author, which at the same time he plays with practised virtuosity.

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