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"I don't feel at ease with the people I meet in first-class carriages and expensive restaurants: I don't think they feel at ease either, but they have a marvellous armour. They pretend to be at ease.

"Biologically, we're not meant to be in contact with new people all the time. It's extraordinarily difficult to keep putting out your tentacles and making contact. As an animal, we've evolved over a couple of million years adapted to a social life within a very small tribe. The switchboard in our head has connections which can handle between 150 and 200 people. If you belong to a small tribe that's about the number you know from birth to death: there's no pulling out plugs and shoving in new ones because it's a static state".

Farley and Clare, his wife, lived for five years in a Newfoundland fishing community which fitted this ideal, everybody knowing each other and drifting unselfconsciously through each other's kitchens: the children called every grown-up "uncle" or "aunt". The Mowats were made welcome, but knew they could never truly belong. So now they divide their time between two homes 1,200 miles apart — one in Ontario and the other in Nova Scotia. Clare is continually packing suitcases, while Farley declares with every appearance of cheerfulness, "We're social cripples, so we may as well accept that we live in an unnatural state".

One way to survive perpetual upheaval is to create your own atmosphere as you go. Farley Mowat does this more effectively than most: the words flow, the humour flows, people listen and like him. He evolved the style when he first started writing and his Canadian publishers told their writers to go out and publicize themselves: Pierre Berton and Earle Birney are two others who helped build up a public for Canadian authors in this way.

His down-to-basics attitude cuts a lot of ice, whether he is socializing under the chandeliers of the High Commission in London or with Russians in the remoter parts of Siberia, where he has travelled to meet Russian Eskimos and spend the royalties brought in by the sale of his books in Russia. It also cuts through some awkward political barriers that might embarrass anyone with a subtler interest in the polemics of freedom.

He says: "I met a lot of Russian writers and travelled to Siberia with them. That was great: when you get across the Urals the bureaucratic net thins out and everybody is anti-bureaucratic, like they used to be in western Canada in the early years.

"I didn't meet any so-called dissidents. Most of the Russian writers rather laugh at the dissidents. They say, 'What's the point of what they are doing? If they want to change the country they should write inside it as we do'. They don't see any advantage in creating international incidents. They

know how far they can go and they keep pushing the barriers a little bit all the time."

This from a man who refuses to take any kind of government grant back home in Canada in case he should feel inhibited in the freedom of his writing. But politics is not what Farley Mowat is about. His active concern in Russia was with the Soviet Government's treatment of its northern settlements. He has been consistently effective in his championship of those people, animals and places he sees to be threatened by the advance of civilization and his pen has been mighty in their cause.

Now at 57 he is writing his autobiography. "Well, why not write about oneself? I don't know any subject that any writer knows more about. The pose that we mustn't write about ourselves is simply a pose. All writing is essentially autobiographical if it's any good, so why go through all the nonsense of disguising it?"

He says he is uninhibited by the absence of disguise "because I have a high disregard for my own dignity. It puzzles and bewilders me that I am usually the butt of the jokes of life, but then I think we all are. Only most of us take it too seriously".

**Farley Mowat books just published in Britain as Pan paperbacks are *The Grey Seas Under*; *The Serpent's Coil*, about a liberty ship that refused to die; *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*; and *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float*.**

## Canadian in Britain

# Man behind the revolution at WHS

By Roy Turman

Being a "crazy Canadian" sounds like an improbable credential for scaling the commanding heights of British business, but it didn't stop Peter Bennett of Toronto.

He's Canadian to the core, yet he somehow found his way to the top in one of the most quintessentially English of English companies — W. H. Smith and Son.

Everybody knows Smith's — stationers, newsagents and booksellers — as British an institution as cricket, crumpets or afternoon tea. A railway station in Britain without a W. H. Smith bookstall would be like a train without tracks.

In short it's a thriving symbol of olde England, and on the surface not exactly the natural habitat for North Americans schooled in a breezier business climate. In the past, W. H. Smith has been associated with a certain formality and traditionalism, leading observers to rank it among the "most prissy" of corporations.



Now this British dynasty, dating from the days when the guillotines of the French Revolution were still streaked with blood, has Bennett directing its £393m. annual business from an executive suite just off Fleet Street in London, imparting his personal stamp to a firm that employs 18,000 people, runs nearly 1,000 vehicles up to 13 million miles a year and is still expanding.

"It's a marvellous life," says Bennett, a tall, spruce, athletic-looking man who looks years younger than his age, which is 60. It's been said that he and Dick Troughton, whom he succeeded early in 1977 as chairman, were responsible for transforming W. H. Smith's retail operations, dragging it kicking and screaming, in one commentator's words, into the twentieth century.

In the year ended January 1978, Smith's reaped record profits of £20,172,000 (before tax) and Bennett is keeping up the expansionist pace, moving into Europe by way of the Netherlands and experimenting with new lines, such as knitting wools, dress specialities and records. "It's going to be quite a challenge to maintain the growth," Bennett told *Canada Today* in an interview.

Born in Toronto in 1917 of English parents, educated at Upper Canada College and at the University of Toronto, Bennett says that the Second World War was a major formative influence in his life.