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# FARLEY MOWAT

## MY DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

"A HILARIOUS ROMP OF A BOOK."  
—ALLAN FOTHERINGHAM



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"Small wonder the INS proscribed him as one of the 40,000 dangerous characters in its 'Lookout Book,' to be kept out of the country at all costs under the 1952 McCarran Act. If he were a terrorist, Communist, Nazi or cocaine dealer—all a dime a dozen—INS could afford to look the other way. But this man is a *writer* . . .

"Fortunately the INS caught him red-handed with an airline ticket in Toronto Airport, and banned him . . . If we let such a man into the country, he would probably try to save the rockfish. He is beyond redemption."

—*Baltimore Sun*

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# Foreword

For most of my sixty-four years, I have lived close to the "world's longest undefended border" – the imaginary line dividing Canada from the United States of America. Nine out of ten Canadians live within a hundred miles or so of this boundary, which, they fondly believe, is little more than a property line between two especially good neighbours.

Throughout much of my life, I, too, believed this to be the case, having been a frequent visitor in my neighbour's yard. On the first occasion, I was still in my mother's womb and, had she delayed in Cleveland a few more weeks, I might have first seen the light of day in the U.S.A. – and been able to claim dual citizenship in consequence.

I travelled back and forth many times before reaching puberty, and have done so often enough since, usually in connection with my work as a writer but sometimes simply for the fun of it. In the course of these travels, I have gone from Atlantic to Pacific, and from the northern tier of states south into Mexico.

I thought I knew the place.

The chasm of my ignorance began to gape before me on Tuesday, April 23, 1985. This book is an account of what ensued thereafter.

Although in one sense it is about me, in a much larger and more important sense I play only a walk-through part in a story that is more concerned with how *other* people saw and reacted to the circumstances in which I found myself enmeshed. It is perhaps best categorized as a case history. As such, it consists largely of the observations, deductions, conclusions, and opinions of others.

I cannot begin to acknowledge all of these people by name since the roster includes not only scores of reporters, editorial



and other writers, and interviewers, but also hundreds of individuals who, in addition to their letters, sent me a mountain of newspaper and magazine clippings, together with much other information that would not otherwise have come my way. Some of them I cannot name in any case, since they made their contributions in confidence.

Nevertheless, to one and all, I give my abiding gratitude. I acknowledge that this is *your* book as much as mine, and I hope it carries the message that almost all of you were so anxious to express in your separate and distinctive ways.

I must make one additional acknowledgment: I am grateful to the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the U.S. Department of Justice, without which this book could not have been written.

# Prologue

Michael Bauman, Professor of English, and a prime mover in the Canadian Studies faculty of California State University at Chico, began it all.

Where is Chico? Well may you ask. I've learned it lies a couple of hours' drive north of Sacramento, California, under the loom of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. I think it is a small agricultural town. It is where Michael Bauman lives.

Three or four years ago, Michael got a bee in his bonnet. He decided to persuade a Canadian writer, namely me, to visit Chico, give a seminar or two, and talk about his work, his hopes, his dreams. Michael decided to do this because he liked my books and because he thought I would be a good person to help dispel the myth of the Great White North.

This is a delusion afflicting many Americans, one that makes them shiver apprehensively on those rare occasions when they acknowledge the existence of a frozen wasteland lying mainly to the north of the 49th parallel of latitude, inhabited by a meagre scattering of beer-drinking, parka-clad, bacon-eating lumberjacks, polar bears, and scarlet-coated stalwarts of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Michael wrote to me. He wrote and he wrote. I ignored the first several letters but, eventually, impressed by his persistence, I replied, telling him there was no way under God I was going to travel all the way to Chico, wherever that might be, to bend the ears of his students. When he nevertheless continued to importune me, I lied. I said: Well, maybe I could come *next* year; why not ask me then?

When the next year came, he asked me. By then, he had begun to intrigue me, as had his Canadian Studies faculty. In Chico, California? Such faculties are extremely rare in the United States and the few about which I have previously

heard all nestle under the wings of major eastern universities. So, finally, in the autumn of 1984, I responded to the current Bauman plea by opining that I might consider a visit the following spring, if a way could be found to fund the expedition.

Michael found a way. He besieged Canadian Consulate officials in San Francisco, pleading with them to get Mowat for him. Since it so happened that the Canadian Consulates in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle had all received requests to bring me to the West Coast to talk to students, literary clubs, and environmental groups, his plea fell on fertile ground.

In January, 1985, the cultural director of the Department of External Affairs (Canada's State Department, as it were) asked me to undertake a tour of the American West Coast. Since my current book, *Sea of Slaughter*, was to be published in the United States late in April, I agreed to go then, providing I could combine promotion of the book with my duties as a cultural emissary. External Affairs readily concurred, and commissioned the Writers' Union of Canada to arrange the details of my itinerary and travel plans.

Michael was now well on the way to achieving his purpose. While he was busily engaged making preparations for my arrival in Chico, my wife and I flew to Australia for the month of March, where I attended a writers' conference, then lectured at a number of universities, all under the aegis of External Affairs, at the invitation of Edward Schreyer, Canadian High Commissioner (a synonym for Ambassador) to Australia.

We had barely arrived home at the end of March when Bauman called me. He was distraught, and he was mad. Did I know that External Affairs had cancelled out? I did not know. I phoned the Writers' Union and the news was confirmed. "All three consulates," I was told, "seem to have simultaneously discovered they are going to be too busy to receive you. They suggest a postponement, but are vague as to future dates."

I called Michael back and apologized on behalf of my government and myself; but, in all honesty, I was somewhat relieved. In truth, I had had quite enough of travel for the

nonce and was looking forward to some peace and quiet at home. In hoping for such, I did not reckon with the indomitable Mr. Bauman.

During my absence in Australia he had been in close touch with the lady at the Writers' Union who was arranging my itinerary, and both had been collaborating with my American publishers, Atlantic Monthly Press of Boston and New York. When External Affairs so abruptly dropped the project, my publishers decided to go it alone, much applauded by Michael Bauman. "We were having nothing but trouble getting straight answers from the staff in your consulates anyway," I was told. "You, and we, are probably better off without them."

I was not so sure. A new and much heavier itinerary had been arranged - one intended to promote my book to the saturation point. But Chico had not been forgotten: I was to spend an uncluttered weekend there as the house guest of the Baumans, and it was this happy prospect that persuaded me to accept the new ordeal.

So as you can see, ultimate responsibility for all that subsequently came to pass must be laid squarely at Michael Bauman's door.



Reproduced courtesy Terry Mosher.

# I

## *Tuesday, April 23*

*Depart Pearson International Airport, Toronto, 1:15 p.m.  
Air Canada Flight #795.*

*Arrive Los Angeles, 3:30 p.m.*

*You will be met by a Prime Time Limo and taken to your  
hotel, the Beverly Wilshire.*

"Promotion tours," I complained to my wife, Claire, as I dragged my suitcase to the front door, "are a royal pain in the ass. Don't know why I let myself get suckered into them. Jet lag in a dozen cities that all look and smell alike - rat-racing from radio studio to TV studio to do the same damn interview for the umpteenth time - autographing 'parties' where the only body that turns up is a fifth cousin, twice removed!"

"Think of the bright side," Claire said soothingly. "The adulation; the free booze; the swish hotel suites; the chance to twirl your kilt in public . . . Besides, how else can we writers get the kind of publicity we need to sell our books?"

"I'll think about that," I grumbled, sliding into the passenger seat beside neighbour David Brooks, who was driving me to the airport. "Meanwhile, take care, honey. See you in ten days' time . . . if I survive."

It was a magnificent spring morning, bright, warm, and tranquil, as we drove out of Port Hope, the little town on the north shore of Lake Ontario where I spend part of my year. David thought so, too.

"Nice day for a trip," he offered.

"Nicer day to stay home and plant the bleeding garden!" I snapped.

Sensing my mood, he said no more as we made the seventy-five-mile freeway trek to Toronto's Malton Airport - now

pompously renamed Lester B. Pearson International in honour of a defunct Prime Minister.

But David was right. It *was* a charming day. And, despite myself, I began to feel little twinges of excitement, even anticipation, at the prospect of visiting the West Coast of the United States: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento and the little university town of Chico, then finally Seattle. Some of it was bound to be worthwhile, even if I did have to spend most of my time peddling my book, which had, by no mere coincidence, been published that very day in the United States.

Over the years I had received hundreds of good letters from Californians and Washingtonians who had read my earlier books. And Peter Davison, friend and editor of three decades' standing at Atlantic, had called to cheer me on.

"You'll find it stimulating. The West Coast has the worst, and some of the best of America to offer. Furthermore, people there *buy books* . . . and even read them."

Ah, well, I thought, as we pulled into the airport. It may not be so bad. After all, I *was* being sent First Class – a condition that makes air travel almost tolerable. In deference to this munificence on the part of my publishers, I had dressed soberly in a pair of impeccably creased grey slacks, a tweedy jacket, and something I almost never wear – a tie.

David bade me farewell and departed. Feeling quite chipper now, I made my way through the vast terminal building to an enclave occupied by U.S. Customs and Immigration. I presented myself to the Customs counter.

Having first determined where I was bound, a sallow fellow with a long-suffering face asked if I had anything to declare.

"Nothing but good intentions," I replied cheerfully, if stupidly.

He winced. "Open the bag!"

I did so and he rumpled aimlessly through it; but when he came to my kilt in all its yards of gaudy tartan, he stopped, raised his pale eyes to mine, and said accusingly:

"This is a *skirt*!"

"No," I explained. "It is a kilt."

"You wear that thing?"

"I do indeed. And proudly."

"A *skirt*," he reiterated. "'Frisco ought to suit you good."

A trifle less jauntily, I moved on to a sort of toll booth presided over by a uniformed young man whose shoulder flashes proclaimed him to be a member of the INS – the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the United States of America. He was wispy, sandy-haired, bespectacled, and mild of manner. I warmed to him at once. Here, surely, was the archetypal, shy, but friendly American.

He asked me the usual routine questions, accepting all my answers with a nod . . . until he came to the purpose of my journey.

"Business," I told him. And then I breached what fellow-author Max Braithwaite calls the cardinal rule for dealing with customs and immigration officials the world over. *Never Volunteer Information!*

"I'm off to the West Coast to promote my newest book. I'm an author, you see."

His head came up and his eyes, behind their windows, seemed to sharpen. Vaingloriously, I thought he might have recognized me.

"Show me your tickets."

I passed them over.

"Your name is Mao-it?"

"Mowat – as in poet," I corrected him.

"So. Your first name Fairley?"

"*Farley*," I said kindly. "As in barley." Since only my initials appeared on the airline tickets, I deduced from this exchange that he must know me by repute even if he couldn't pronounce my name. At any rate, he stamped my boarding pass and waved me into the corridor leading to the departure lounge.

I found a seat, got out a pocketbook, and prepared to read until the boarding call. But after five minutes or so, I became aware that the sandy-haired INS man had materialized beside me. He must have approached as softly as a cat.

"Ah ha," thought I smugly. "I'll bet he wants an autograph." I was actually reaching for my pen when he asked me to return to the immigration section. His tone was soft, but it was an order nonetheless. Nonplussed, I followed



him to a tiny cubicle equipped only with a desk and one chair, which he pre-empted. Then, as I stood in increasing bewilderment before him, he peppered me with questions that carried a penetrating chill of menace.

"Have you ever been turned back at the U.S. border?"

"Never!"

"Have you entered, or attempted to enter the U.S.A. illegally?"

"Of course not!"

"Do you have a criminal record?"

"Certainly not!"

"Is there a security file on you in the U.S.A.?"

"Now how would I know that?"

The impertinence of these questions was beginning to annoy me. "What the devil's going on? You already passed me through - remember?"

"I need further identification."

"Well," thought I. "They must be confusing me with someone else. Thank God I've brought my passport." Although neither passport nor visa is usually required of Canadians visiting the United States, I invariably carry that magic little book whenever I go abroad. With something of a flourish I produced it.

The INS man flipped it open, stared at the rogues' gallery portrait contained therein, then without a word stood up and ambled off, the passport in his hand.

"Excuse me," I asked of his retreating back. "Should I wait here or in the departure lounge?"

"Wait there," he replied, without even deigning to turn his head.

Indignant at his rudeness, but baffled and bewildered, too, my thoughts raced. What was happening here? It had to be some minor bureaucratic muddle! There could be no earthly reason the Americans, in this, the sixty-fourth year of my life, should decide to keep me out! Probably a case of mistaken identity. But if that sandy-haired gumshoe didn't hurry back, I might miss my flight.

Ten - fifteen minutes dragged by. Flight time was inexorably approaching and I have a life-long fear of missing