

# A Sea of Slaughter

Farley Mowat on the Assault on Wildlife

Alice Detroit

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a review of

*Sea of Slaughter* by Farley Mowat, 1985, Atlantic Monthly, 438 pp. \$24.95

In a world where the victor writes the history books, we are grateful for Farley Mowat's eloquent and dissenting account of the rape of the North American continent.

The ravagers came in search of oil, furs and food. The life they led was adventurous; it was also dangerous and violent. Mowat quotes the eyewitness report of a Professor J.B. Jukes, who in 1840 went as an observer to the main sealing patch in the brigantine *Topaz*:

"We passed through some loose ice on which the young seals were scattered, and nearly all hands went overboard, slaying, skinning and hauling...

"When piled in a heap together, the young seals looked like so many lambs and when from out of the bloody and dirty mass of carcasses one poor wretch, still alive, would lift up its face and begin to flounder about. I could stand it no longer and, arming myself with a handspike, I proceeded to knock on the head and put out of their misery all in whom I saw signs of life...One of the men hooked up a young seal with his gaff. Its cries were precisely like those of a young child in the extremity of agony and distress, something between shrieks and convulsive sobbings... I saw one poor wretch skinned while yet alive, and the body writhing in, blood after being stripped of its pelt...

"The next day, as soon as it was light, all hands went overboard on the ice and were employed in slaughtering young seals in all directions. The young seals lie dispersed, basking in the sun. Six or eight may sometimes be seen within a space of twenty yards square. The men, armed with a gaff and a hauling rope slung over their shoulders, whenever they find a seal, strike it a blow on the head. Having killed, or at least stunned all they see, they sculp them. Fastening the gaff in a bundle of sculps, they then haul it away over the ice to the vessel. Six pelts is reckoned a very heavy load to drag over the rough and broken ice, leaping from pan to pan, and they generally contrive to keep two or three together to assist at bad places or to pull those out who fall in the water.

"As the men came aboard they snatched a hasty moment to drink a bowl of tea or eat a piece of biscuit and butter; and as the sweat was dripping from their faces, and the hands and bodies were reeking with blood and fat, and they spread the butter with their thumbs and wiped their faces with their hands, they took both the liquids and solids mingled with blood.

“Still, there was a bustle and excitement that did not permit the fancy to dwell on the disagreeables, and after this hearty refreshment the men would hurry off in search of new victims: besides every pelt was worth a dollar!” (pp. 354–5)

This “profession,” requiring its particular type of domestication-dehumanization, was a forerunner to the job of clearing the continent of its original inhabitants. For those of us who are appalled at the callousness of people who could carry out this latter task, Mowat’s book reminds us that Indian-hating is one short step away from animal hating. The “hating” is built into the activity—comes with the job, so to speak. If a “buyer” will exchange a sum of money for some feathers, whale oil or furs, no additional rationale is needed. Perhaps these early ravagers did not “hate” the fish, birds and beasts which they exterminated, but they treated them as commodities, objects whose function was to assure the hunters’ survival. This attitude persists in the vocabulary not only of businessmen, but of government officials and “conservationists.” They speak of pelt “production” and “harvesting” the salmon.

Ownership and possession were unquestioned foundations of the Western World from before the 1200s. Interest in the North American continent came from the inconceivable plenitude of sea, air and land life on the eastern seaboard. The first explorers sought grants to exploit sea coasts and fishing waters. Only when these had been depleted did land become the prime property.

In Mowat’s eyes, most wilderness management professionals are toadies of the system that spawned the devastation. He scathingly debunks their double-talk, double-think duplicity; this makes good reading and effectively discredits the type of bureaucrat labeled “conservationist.”

Mowat also heaps scorn on the modern hunter who travels with sophisticated weapons and machines into the few remaining wilderness areas of the continent. As various species become rare, they become more valuable. “To find them was to kill them” sums up the degrading “sport” of these modern-day adventurers.

In concluding his account of the bobcat removal, we learn that the “invaders eventually reduced the cat to vestigial numbers throughout most of its formerly widespread range, virtually extirpating it from the eastern portion of the continent except for the few forest sanctuaries that still endure in the eastern States and Canada’s Maritime Provinces.

“So secretive did [the bobcat] become as a result of centuries of persecution that it was not until the late 1960s that the existence of a relatively large bobcat population in the wilderness regions of central Nova Scotia was revealed as a result of a survey of fur-bearing animals conducted by the provincial Department of Lands and Forests. Once discovered, it was decided to ‘utilize this resource’ as a means of attracting hunters to the province.

“This led to the establishment of the World Bobcat Hunt, centered on the town of Truro where, in the words of one advertisement widely published in U.S. sportsmen’s magazines, ‘there are always plenty of cats for your hounds to kill.’ The first World Bobcat Hunt was literally a howling success as something like 600 hounds, mainly from the eastern and central United States, were loosed in the Nova Scotian woods. Hunters followed the hounds in 4 x 4 trucks or all-terrain vehicles. Some of the more affluent ones used helicopters. Like most cats when pursued by hounds, bobcats tree readily: They can then easily be shot, but many hunters do not kill the animals outright, preferring to disable them only enough so they will fall to the ground where the hounds can tear them apart while still alive.

“The highlight of the annual hunt is the suspension of a captured bobcat in a wire cage from a tree limb, while as many as a hundred frenzied hounds form a milling mob at the base of the tree. It is of interest to note that, while Nova Scotia’s Department of Lands and Forests forbids the private possession of captive bobcats, its officers supply the ritual sacrifice for this event.” (p. 149)

The bad faith of these avid sportsmen is transparent. Since they want to kill bears, they claim bears infringe on someone’s property rights; since they want to kill birds (and seals and whales...), they claim the birds (and seals and whales...) eat the fish that humans need. Their lust for killing hides behind a utilitarian pragmatism which they assume all will accept.

Mowat eagerly discredits these feeble excuses. Here is what he says in answer to people who say the buffalo was doomed: “Apologists for the destruction of the buffalo admit that their end was unfortunate, but they insist it was inevitable. The buffalo had to go, they say, to make room for more effective use of the land. That is another example of the dubious rationale used by modern man to justify the destruction of other species. Specialists studying the

question of the meat-producing capacity of various ranges and grazing animals have recently concluded that the ability of the western plains to produce beef under human management has never exceeded, or even equaled, the ability of the same range to produce buffalo meat without human husbandry. All that was achieved by exterminating the buffalo and replacing them with cattle was to substitute a less successful and less valuable domestic animal for a more valuable and more successful wild one.

“In any case, the buffalo were not butchered to make room for farmers. That excuse had not yet been invented at the time of their massacre. The brutal truth is that one of the most magnificent and vital forms of life on this planet was destroyed for no better reasons than our desire to eradicate the Plains Indians and an insatiable lust for booty...and for blood.” (pp. 142–3)

The resourcefulness of modern trappers who use technologically advanced and scientific methods has sinister implications. In the spring, wolf hunters attach a transmitter collar to a young wolf they have live-trapped; in the winter airborne hunters can locate the wolf as well as the others in its family. Mowat reports the success of a fox hunter who put a number of caribou carcasses in the vicinity of his cabin. White foxes regularly came there to feed on the carrion. In the late fall when the “hunter” determined that their furs were at maximum thickness, he laced the caribou remains with strychnine tablets.

*Sea of Slaughter* is a documentation of how the Europeans ravaged this continent. The story is not a pleasant one. “The all-embracing nature of the slaughter was awesome tribute to the genius of modern man as mass destroyer.” (p. 364) Mowat’s history indignantly shows that the slaughter was not inevitable. It was perpetrated by some powerful men and many, many powerless ones. He wants us to confront this history—a holocaust, a “biocide” which continues today. Ultimately, our fate may not be so different from the flocks, schools, herds, packs and loners who at one time relatively peacefully inhabited this continent and its surroundings: “Greed took its toll of men as well as seals at the West Ice. During the spring of 1854, the skipper of the British sealer *Orion* dispatched a rally of his men to kill what appeared to be a patch of hoods [seals] amongst a torment of upthrust ice. The patch resolved itself into the frozen corpses of seventy shipwrecked Danish sealers, keeping company with hundreds of blueback carcasses with which the doomed men had tried to construct a barricade against the killing edge of a polar gale.” (p. 362)

Is there any possibility for us to be neither victims nor executioners?

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