

The Farfarers, Farley Mowat.

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Volume 19, numéro 1, spring 2003

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19_1rv01

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Brown, S. C. (2003). *The Farfarers, Farley Mowat*. *Newfoundland Studies*, 19(1), 235–237.

The Farfarers. Farley Mowat. Toronto, Key Porter Books, xiv, 377 p., illu., maps, notes, index, cloth, \$32.95, 1998, ISBN 1-55013-989-4.

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FARLEY MOWAT ONCE AGAIN presents librarians with a quandary -- whether to file one of his books as fact or frank fiction. In this handsomely published volume with the author's signature embossed on the cover, Mowat advances the notion that a European people called the Albans arrived in North America several centuries before the Norse settlement in Vinland. As any competent archaeologist will tell you, in prehistory few things are impossible -- so Mowat's hypothesis cannot be simply dismissed out of hand. There is a small problem though, which must be overcome before an hypothesis can be at least provisionally accepted: the presentation of reasonably compelling evidence. The story is presented in the form of imaginative reconstructions of Alban activities in italicized paragraphs interspersed with Mowat's research on the archaeological, historical and linguistic evidence.

Mowat argues that the Albans were the original inhabitants of Europe, Asia Minor and probably also North Africa until they were driven out by invading Indo-Europeans. The evidence advanced for this fantastic notion is that the phonetic element "alb" can be found in more than three hundred place names from all of these territories, indeed even as far away as the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan. Any historical linguist will immediately recognize that this form of argument based merely on similarity of sound is extraordinarily naïve. In any case, even if it could be demonstrated that all of these occurrences of "alb" were connected, the only linguistic group that demonstrably inhabited Europe, Asia Minor and had connections as far east as Afghanistan were Indo-Europeans, not the imagined Albans.

Mowat asserts that these hapless people were eventually forced to flee northern Britain in skin-covered boats on a path that took them first to Iceland, then on to Greenland and finally to the east coast of Canada. There, on the central-east coast of Ellesmere Island, the Albans chanced upon a huge polynya. These are bodies of water surrounded by sea-ice which either do not freeze at all or freeze in late fall to reappear in early spring. Polynyas are vital to sea mammals as breathing and gathering places and the one off the Knud Peninsula is especially rich in waterfowl, walrus and seals. Here the Albans supposedly constructed several stone-walled longhouses using their overturned boats as roofs. They also laid out a series of connected hearths as a tryworks for rendering seal tar. Rectangular stone structures do exist on the Knud Peninsula and elsewhere in the eastern Arctic. In every case, where they have been archaeologically investigated, the only cultural elements found are related to the Dorset palaeo-Eskimo who inhabited the eastern Arctic from around 800 B.C. to around A.D. 1000. The earliest archaeological indication of either a European presence, or minimally a trade contact, comes from Thule-period sites on Ellesmere Island. Large numbers of Norse artifacts -- ship rivets, chain mail, fragments of woven cloth -- indicate that the Norse must have been in the area around A.D. 1250-1300.

Citing the testimony of the late maverick archaeologist, Thomas E. Lee, Mowat rejects the overwhelming evidence which connects these stone structures to the palaeo-Eskimo. He talks of Lee's deductions carrying "no weight with the archaeological establishment" and asserts that "conventional wisdom continued to maintain that only native peoples were to be looked for in the Canadian Arctic of pre-Columbian times". Lee, we are told, became "more and more marginalized within his own profession" (206). Every profession has its mavericks or erratics and archaeology is no different. One eminent Canadian archaeologist in the Department of

Anthropology at the University of Toronto believed that archaeological sites could be discovered by dowsing and that psychics could reconstruct prehistoric cultures simply by holding artifacts from them. But the notion that professional archaeologists and historians constitute a vast conspiracy whose objective is to promote orthodoxy and smother dissent is so wrong-headed as to be ludicrous. Only someone who is not aware of the level of wide-ranging debate within archaeological circles on problematical issues could arrive at such a conclusion. As Peter Schledermann, the excavator of the Ellesmere Island sites, put it in a review of Mowat's book, "Had we found even a hint of European pre-Norse activities in and around the Late Dorset sites on Knud Peninsula, or elsewhere, we would have been ecstatic. What archaeologist would not have been thrilled to make such a discovery?" (*Canadian Geographic*, November/December 1998: 22). The history of archaeology is, in fact, littered with orthodoxies abandoned in the light of new evidence. Can I recommend *The Farfarers*? Most certainly! I have always enjoyed Farley Mowat's writing and his abiding fascination with Canada and its past. To this tale he brings the full powers of his imagination but, while it is entertaining as fiction, it is far from convincing as fact.