

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS A BIOGRAPHY OF FRANK FARLEY, a well-known Canadian ornithologist active during the first half of the twentieth century. Although now chiefly remembered in Camrose, in east central Alberta, he was widely regarded as “one of the foremost naturalists in Alberta”¹ from the 1920s through the 1940s. After his death in 1949, his obituary in *The Auk* (a leading journal published by the American Ornithologists’ Union [AOU]) concluded that

Farley won wide recognition on the continent as a lover and student of birds and an ardent conservationist. In the best sense of the term he was a true pioneer in Alberta ornithology. His circle of friends was very extensive and his beneficial influence marked in relation to inspiring young students of wildlife. His vigorous and cheerful personality will remain a cherished memory.²

Ornithologists subsequently named a subspecies of the Boreal Chickadee in Farley’s memory (*Parus hudsonicus farleyi*).³ When the first edition of *The Birds of Alberta* appeared in 1958, the book’s authors dedicated it to Farley, “for whom it is intended to serve as a memorial and as a tribute to his great contributions to the appreciation of birds and nature in Alberta.”⁴ In the chapters that follow, we attempt to explain why he was held in such high regard.

Although Farley spent much of his life in western Canada, he was born and brought up in Ontario. He left that province in 1891, when he was twenty-one. The following year he settled near Red Deer. The



FIGURE 0.1 The type specimen of the subspecies of Boreal Chickadee named after Frank Farley (*Parus hudsonicus farleyi*). The specimen is part of the Bird Collection at the Canadian Museum of Nature, collected by Hamilton Mack Laing, August 23, 1926. (Photo by Heather Marshall.)

railway north from Calgary had reached that community in the autumn of 1890. When Farley arrived eighteen months later with fifty dollars in his pocket, the town consisted of only a few buildings. He camped near the Red Deer River with two travelling companions, and then set out to find a promising piece of land. He later remembered a conversation with an Indigenous man that proved particularly useful. “I had quite a talk with him,” Farley recalled.⁵ “He told me if I wanted to get some good land I would find it away to the south-east and he pointed towards the valley beyond the Trimble place on the creek.” After describing the land he selected, Farley acknowledged that the Indigenous man “certainly gave me good advice regarding the land in that part of the country.”

Farley’s early years as a homesteader were similar to those of other settler colonists who came to western Canada during the late nineteenth century. He soon began the necessary improvements to gain title to the land, which included clearing, fencing, erecting buildings, and so on.

But this does not tell the whole story. Farley arrived in the region as the federal government was proceeding with its plan to incorporate the west into Canada, as the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 made clear. The following year, the federal government further enhanced its authority in the west by creating the North-West Mounted Police (the forerunner of today's Royal Canadian Mounted Police), which was sent to the region to assert and maintain Canadian sovereignty. Then, in 1876, the federal government passed the Indian Act, specifically prohibiting those who it defined as "Indians" from having the right to homestead.⁶ The numbered Treaties introduced further limitations (Treaty 6, signed in 1876, being the most relevant to our narrative).⁷ As Carter has argued, these official acts were intended "to introduce private property, to dispossess Aboriginal people of their land, to dominate and colonize."⁸ Needless to say, Farley and the other settler colonists coming west faced no such restrictions.

The Dominion Lands Act came just ten years after the passage of the American Homestead Act, which it resembled and whose purpose was broadly similar. As Patricia Limerick, an American historian, suggested in her aptly-named book, *The Legacy of Conquest*,

Western history is a story structured by the drawing of lines and the marking of borders...an effort first to draw lines dividing the West into manageable units of property and then to persuade people to treat those lines with respect.

...This relationship to physical matter seems to us so commonplace that we must struggle to avoid taking it for granted, to grasp instead the vastness of the continent and the enormous project of measuring, allocating, and record keeping involved in turning the open expanses of North America into transferable parcels of real estate. Like the settlers themselves, we steadfastly believe in the social fiction that lines on a map and signatures on a deed legitimately divide the earth.⁹

These comments apply both to the Canadian and the American wests. Farley's life in western Canada was deeply implicated in the ongoing

process of colonization and dispossession at the time, benefiting from what Witgen described as the political economy of plunder.¹⁰

One of just over four hundred homestead entries made in Red Deer in 1892, Farley entered his homestead less than a month after arriving in the city.¹¹ In the language of the Dominion Land Survey, Farley's land took up the northeast quarter of Section 4, Township 37, Range 26, west of the 4th Meridian.¹² He spent the spring and summer of 1892 engaged in the hard work of homesteading. By mid-autumn, he was ready for his first winter in the west. The cold weather arrived in spectacular fashion, with Farley witnessing a remarkable flight of Snow Geese. "Towards evening on the 14th [of October 1892]," he wrote,

a sudden cold wave swept out of the north, accompanied by heavy snow and wind of blizzard proportions, the first sign of winter. I had just finished building a cabin on my homestead ten miles south-east of Red Deer, and was preparing for my first winter in Alberta. Before dark, flock after flock of white geese appeared in the sky coming from the north, heading due south, and flying with terrific speed in their attempt to get ahead of the winter's first icy blast. Tens of thousands of geese passed over in the first hour or two, while throughout the night the mad rush continued unabated. There was never a moment during the darkness when the babel of noise could not be heard. In the morning a wonderful sight met my view as I looked out over the snow-covered valley and watched the flocks, so close together that they touched and in many cases overlapped. Several lines of V shaped flocks could always be seen over a width of a mile or more, and the noise was almost deafening as an enormous assemblage swung low, barely a hundred feet above the cabin's roof. Although snow fell constantly during the entire twenty-four hours, and vision was at times limited, the geese never appeared to lose their bearings. Thousands were always in sight during the day of the 15th, and it seemed as though all the "wavies" on the continent were rushing south through this very restricted area, probably less than five miles in width. The flight continued until darkness set in on the 15th, and it ended just as abruptly as it began...¹³

The passage gives a sense not only of the remarkable sight and sounds of the birds flying overhead but also of the young man below, watching in wonder. The vivid prose suggests that Farley had a keen appreciation of his surroundings.

Farley's new home near Red Deer was a little over 2,500 kilometres distant from his family back in St. Thomas, Ontario. As Chapter 1 will show, Farley was fascinated with birds from a young age. He published his first article in an ornithological journal when he was sixteen. A year later, in 1887, he had begun keeping a detailed diary of bird sightings and behaviours, including notes of bird songs.¹⁴

By this point, Farley had begun to collect relevant books and magazines. An advertisement he placed in *The Oologist* in 1890 suggests that he was planning a library and was becoming an astute bargainer. The ad explained that Farley sought "Books and Magazines relating to Ornithology or Oology for which [he would] exchange first-class Birds' Eggs in sets, with data."¹⁵ Soon he was pursuing a more focused approach, reflecting increasingly sophisticated interests. He sought out specific titles: "Wanted.—Coues' Key, for which I will give either 'Coues' Bird Life of New England' or 'Samuel's Northern and Eastern Birds', and \$4.00 worth of desirable eggs in sets with data."¹⁶

Farley's advertisement for *Coues' Key* appeared in *The Oologist* just as he moved west. Written by renowned American ornithologist Elliott Coues—hence the shorthand title *Coues' Key*—the book was indispensable for those who wanted to situate their own observations and conclusions within the broader conceptual framework emerging at the time.¹⁷ The subtitle of Coues' book referred to "the New Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union," reflecting a growing consensus concerning the most appropriate method to classify birds. The AOU's method was based on the system developed more than a century earlier by Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist.¹⁸ Farley's efforts to acquire Coues' book just as he was heading west meant that he was taking with him, literally and symbolically, the then emerging standard methods of ornithology.

Like other naturalists intent on describing, classifying, and eventually conserving the birds of western Canada, Farley's views were firmly

grounded in European understandings of the natural world. This view reflected the process of settler colonization, which was then underway. This process largely ignored the authority of Indigenous traditional knowledge and asserted that of the European colonizer in its place.¹⁹ Farley's life may be a local story grounded in east central Alberta, but it is nonetheless one firmly embedded in the complex issues of the western Canadian past.

In some ways, Farley's biography is not particularly different from that of other settler colonists during this period. At first a homesteader and farmer, he went on to become a businessperson with diverse interests, a politician, and an enthusiastic local booster after moving to Camrose. The range and extent of Farley's activities is striking, which his contemporaries also acknowledged. In 1939, for example, the local newspaper listed his contributions and accomplishments, noting that "No man in this community has had a wider variety of interests." The article pointed out that Farley had been

a business man, a farmer, a keen participant in municipal projects, an authority on bird-life in western Canada, founder and president of the Fish and Game Association, founder and president of the Camrose Historical Society...In early years he was a member of the town council, was the first secretary of the Camrose Fair Society, has been chairman of the Library Board, a member of the school board, President of the Board of Trade, President of Camrose Rotary Club, and has occupied other positions he himself has forgotten...²⁰

Notwithstanding this daunting list of activities, Farley pursued other interests. He was also a prolific author, educator, volunteer, local historian, ornithologist, and environmentalist. And he loved to sing.

From our perspective, the most interesting aspect of Farley's life was his extensive activities as an amateur naturalist. In this role, he frequently acted as an intermediary, drawing the public's attention to his friends' and colleagues' work in the scientific community and highlighting its significance. He assisted others with their research, shared his own observations and findings, and on occasion acted as a

go-between with government officials. In addition, he worked tirelessly to mentor young people, going to considerable lengths to teach them about the natural world. And all of these efforts bore fruit. The individuals he mentored went on to have significant careers as scientists, writers, and educators, not least his great-nephew Farley Mowat. In what is perhaps Mowat's best-loved book, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*, he acknowledged that his Uncle Frank "laid his hand upon me when I was five years old, and I have not completely evaded his shadowy grip even to this day."²¹

The following seven chapters describe in greater detail the various roles that Farley played. Nonetheless, we should acknowledge that this is an incomplete portrait. The details of his private life and the nature of his personal relationships are largely absent from our narrative. In part this is because Farley's personal papers remain undiscovered or—more likely—were destroyed. Occasionally, one catches glimpses of his personality, as when Harry Laughy, a journalist friend, visited Camrose and went out for a drive with Farley:

Ever go motoring with a crank? Farley's one! His hallucinations are harmless, however, as well as interesting. He's a Birdologist.

"Yes, Miss Humphreys!" I heard him say, as we passed a swallow that had been flying straight ahead of us. "That is a Sand Martin, though they don't build in the banks here, as they used to do back east. They nest in the old abandoned woodpeckers' holes, and in such places. No! That's a Grebe—a Hell Diver, the boys will call it. Say! That will be great for the grain! Look at the pond of water that was left by that last shower. I was afraid it wouldn't reach so far south—NO! That's Rye: Fall Rye, and shows the effects of lots of moisture, too. But Camrose has never known a dry summer in fifteen years."...

"Oh yes, Mrs. Point, we have the Sky-lark here! But few Albertans know him." This from Farley during a lull in my meditations. "He flies very high in this country. I've lain on my back watching him until I burned my nose to a cinder."²²

The journalist commented wryly, “So that is how a wiseman from the East acquires his profound knowledge—lie on his back and get his nose sun burned.” No doubt this was written in fun, but the article gives the reader the sense that Farley would be gesturing to and commenting on every bird that could be seen through the windows of the speeding car.

Public notice of what were plainly crucial events in Farley’s life was often perfunctory. When Farley married in September 1896, for example, the newspaper account noted cryptically:

Mr Borrowman leaves Edwell for Ontario the end of October with his family.

Mr. Frank Farley, of Edwell, was married to Miss Bell Cragg last week.

The weather has been fine.²³

Even if detail is often lacking, one can still sense that Farley was respected by many. For example, when the anxious parents of a missing little girl sought help,

Mr. Farley in Camrose was notified and he, together with all the Boy Scouts at hand and numerous other town volunteers hastened to the scene, arriving towards morning...In spite of the darkness Mr. Farley organized a search party of between 150 and 200 men and lads. Joining hands the searchers started off to cover every foot of ground. About daybreak the tot was found, unharmed and sound asleep, and in an altogether different direction to that the parents had in mind.²⁴

Overall, however, personal details are rarely mentioned in his letters or in the other source materials that have survived. While the tone of his extensive correspondence with fellow ornithologists Dewey Soper, William Rowan, and Percy Taverner makes it clear that he enjoyed warm friendships with all three men, it tells us very little else. The attitudes and assumptions of an earlier time likely explain that silence.

Even though we have been unable to discover much about Farley's private life, this does not make it insignificant. His intimate relationship with his wife Ethel doubtless informed her determined efforts to see her husband's work on the birds of Alberta published after his death. Farley's earlier marriage to Ethel's sister hints at his close ties with Ethel's family, as does the fact that Ethel's mother, Cornelia Cragg, was living with them in Camrose when she died in August 1928.²⁵ Evidence also points to a similar intimacy with his own family. No less than three of his uncles, including Harry Berry, lived in Camrose following Farley's move there in 1907.²⁶ In 1945, Harry died on his ranch near Camrose. Farley left the following day, taking his uncle's body back to Michigan to be interred, a gesture that suggests a close relationship between the two men.²⁷

The following pages describe the activities that Farley pursued in rural Alberta during the first half of the twentieth century. The significance of Farley's activities can be understood by situating them within the burgeoning historiography of western Canada. Donald Wetherell's *Wildlife, Land, and People: A Century of Change in Prairie Canada* is an important contribution to this literature. Wetherell argues that people living on the Prairies tended to regard the natural world with considerable ambivalence. His book describes how those in the region viewed wildlife following the onset of European colonization and settlement after 1870. Wetherell insists that "encounters between people and wild animals were part of the broader history of the region." In his view, "relationships with wildlife were intertwined with the implanting of a new Euro-Canadian economic and social order in the prairie region. Thus, the relationships were part of state formation, public policy, province-building ambitions, and Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian relations."²⁸ Wetherell makes a compelling case for his claim that wildlife was a significant actor in this changing world.²⁹

In his book *Game in the Garden: A Human History of Wildlife in Western Canada to 1940*, George Colpitts argues, "In the case of the Canadian west, frontier and pioneer societies invested wild animals with new symbolic meanings at critical moments of environmental and

economic change.”³⁰ Even before European colonization and settlement began in the Prairie west, members of the Hudson’s Bay Company worked with scientists and others to describe and classify the region’s birds and animals.³¹ Despite claims of superabundant wildlife in the region, well-described in Colpitts’ book, conservation became a growing concern in Farley’s lifetime.

Tina Loo’s influential book, *States of Nature: Conserving Canada’s Wildlife in the Twentieth Century*, is another important contribution to the literature. She argues, “From almost its beginnings in the early twentieth century, conservation policy had the effect of marginalizing local customary uses of wildlife, and in that sense was part of the colonization of rural Canada.”³² She contrasts the contribution of individuals like Jack Miner and Farley Mowat with the role of government scientists like Farley’s friend, Percy Taverner. The dichotomy that Loo poses between, on the one hand, the federal bureaucrats and, on the other, the representatives of “working-class rural environmentalism” like Miner seems far less pronounced when one examines the relationship that Farley enjoyed with both groups. He urged his fellow residents of Camrose to attend Miner’s lectures, maintained a very cordial friendship and extensive correspondence with Taverner and other civil servants and, as we have suggested, played a formative role in the careers of Mowat and many other young people.³³ This is not to refute Loo’s careful analysis of wildlife conservation but rather to claim that some interesting nuances become apparent when her topic is considered in the light of Farley’s activities and interests. Farley straddled the divide between the “practical men,” whom Loo identifies as key local actors in conservation, and the growing number of federal civil servants whose careers were devoted to framing and then implementing conservation policy. A later chapter describes the decade that Farley spent as game officer at Miquelon Lake, highlighting his role as an intermediary between these two groups. He had no trouble acting as both a local conservationist and a dutiful bureaucrat. The extent of the surviving correspondence between Farley and those to whom he reported is itself a good example of the increasingly bureaucratic world of conservation. Although, as will be seen in later chapters, Farley took

a characteristically active role at Miquelon Lake, recommending and reporting on numerous initiatives.³⁴

Farley himself has attracted little attention from scholars, although several biographies of his friends and colleagues have been written. Our knowledge of the world of Canadian ornithology owes much to the late Marianne Ainley. Her 1985 doctoral dissertation, “From Natural History to Avian Biology: Canadian Ornithology 1860–1950,” remains an excellent introduction to the subject. She also wrote an engaging and exhaustive biography of Farley’s good friend, William Rowan. The latter was a prominent scientist at the University of Alberta from 1920 until his retirement in 1956. Rowan was well-known for his groundbreaking research on bird migration.³⁵ Farley’s two other close friends, federal ornithologist Percy Taverner and Dewey Soper (also a federal civil servant) are both subjects of full-scale biographies.³⁶ From 1920 through to the 1940s, Farley was in regular contact with all three men. Their extensive correspondence reveals their passionate interest in ornithology as well as the warmth of their friendship.

Although women participated in science generally, and ornithology in particular, during this time, they were far less visible than their male colleagues. Tina Crossfield’s study of Elsie Cassels, another friend of Farley’s, sheds significant light on this understudied aspect of Canadian natural history. As Crossfield points out, Cassels, Rowan, Farley and others formed “a small, but significant network of naturalists who had an important impact on the state of wildlife and wild spaces during a time when Canadian conservation was only a concept in the minds of a few federal civil servants.”³⁷ The biographies that have been written about members of this network, along with their surviving correspondence and papers, confirm the accuracy of her observation. Considering this, we want to highlight the significant role played by Farley and trace the way in which he became one of Alberta’s foremost naturalists.

