

A Book Review—

Mowat and 'Siberians'

By WALLY OLSON

The *SIBERIANS* by Farley Mowat (Penguin Books, Baltimore, Md. 1970. Paperback, \$1.45)

The author became famous for his description of *THE PEOPLE OF THE DEER* and his defense of wolves in *NEVER CRY WOLF*. After two extended trips through Russia's Arctic, he has now produced a very readable description of contemporary life among the Small Peoples of the North, — the Russian term for the minorities of the Arctic. Although one of my friends aptly described it as "Siberia as seen through the bottom of a vodka glass", the book does give new insights into recent changes and economic growth in the north.

Many Americans still consider Siberia to be a vast wasteland or a place to send political exiles; Mowat shows how mistaken these ideas are. For example, there are many cities in Siberia with populations numbering in the thousands. A few are well over a hundred thousand people. There are extensive gold fields, diamond mines and huge hydroelectric projects. Even though the author may paint an overly optimistic picture, there is no denying that along with the economic growth, there has been considerable respect for the ancient cultures of the Small Peoples.

The *SIBERIANS* should prove to be extremely thought-provoking for the readers of the *Tundra Times*. The geographical setting is quite similar to most of Alaska, yet Mowat continually points out that Russian economic advances are far beyond what we have. He takes to task many of our "experts" for refusing to learn from our neighbors across the Bering Strait. As an example, in Chapter 16, he describes the growth of the reindeer industry to the point where today it produces over FIFTY-THOUSAND TONS OF MEAT ANNUALLY! And yet, according to the author, American experts refuse to learn new techniques that could bring comparable development to our arctic region. Mowat gives many, many examples of new methods of road construction, the use of permafrost as an aid to construction — not an obstacle as we tend to see it.

For those who are interested in detailed explanations of new methods and techniques in northern areas, the book may prove a little disappointing. The author touches on a few special points of development, and then quickly proceeds to launch into the description of another feast or party. About the time that one's interest is aroused, the topic is abandoned and the book goes on. However, it is a nice rebuttal for those pessimistic prophets of doom who refuse to look at what can be done.

In reading the book, I recommend you keep your thumb on the maps for quick reference to geographic locations. Many people are unfamiliar with Siberian geography and history and it is easy for those just beginning to study Siberia to get lost in the vast expanses on the map. Mowat's maps have the advantage of simplifying the geography and add a great deal to the text.

Farley Mowat's earlier books opened the eyes of many people to what was happening in Canada's far north. *THE SIBERIANS* follows the same pattern. It may obscure some of the problems and difficulties, but it does show that there is a great future for the Arctic if only we are willing to look for it and try new things.

