

Samuel Hearne (1745-1792)



Samuel Hearne was a contradictory and controversial character. He was a gentle man who avoided violence when he could, but lashed out when it was necessary to achieve his goal; he loved good clothes and food, but could go long periods without either; he drank almost no alcohol, but on his retirement joined the exclusive Bucks Club in London whose sole purpose was to get roaring drunk and go rampaging through nighttime streets. As an historical figure, commentators then, and historians now, have never agreed on what manner of man he was or on the significance of his work. To one school he was an arrant coward, too unimportant to war-

rant a biography and too inept to deserve respect. The opposite evaluation places him high on the roster of giants who made the Age of Discovery the most adventuresome era in history.

Hearne was born in 1745 in London. He was an indifferent schoolboy and at the age of eleven was in the Royal Navy under the command of Admiral Samuel Hood. He saw action during the Seven Years War but left the Navy and, in 1766, became an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, which sent him to Fort Prince of Wales at the mouth of the Churchill River.

The charter of the Hudson's Bay Company gave it virtual

sovereignty over all the lands draining into the west shores of Hudson Bay, but it provided also that the Company explore, establish posts in the interior, and search for the Northwest Passage, or Strait of Anian as it was generally termed on non-English charts. No one knows how the concept of a waterway through North America came to be, but from Juan de la Cosa, 1500, to Jonathan Carver, 1788, cartographers depicted it on their maps. The nation that discovered and controlled it would break the Spanish hold on Pacific-Orient trade and open a shorter and more profitable route to the Far East. Cartier, Frobisher, Gilbert, Davis, Hudson, Munk, and many others had sought it. But it was left for Samuel Hearne to prove their labours had been in vain.

During its first century the Company had made no determined attempt to penetrate the interior and only the most half-hearted excursions were sent to seek Anian. By the 1730s, however, significant opposition to Company sovereignty and its implementation of its charter obligations had arisen in both England and America. Arthur Dobbs, Surveyor-General of Ireland, initiated a twenty-year struggle to force the Company to meet its charter terms. His challenges generated enough interest to induce the House of Parliament to offer a prize of £20,000 for the discovery of a strait.

By 1769 it had been demonstrated that no such passage existed between the Churchill River and the Gulf of Mexico, and by then, too, Samuel Hearne had become dissatisfied. He disliked routine Company work, he detested Moses Norton, Chief Factor at Fort Prince of Wales, and as yet there had been no opportunity to "make a name" for himself, as he phrased it.

Rumours of extensive inland copper deposits had often come to the Churchill, but nothing had been done about them. Hearne saw his chance. He applied for and was granted permission to lead an expedition into the North, accompanied by two white men and certain Indians, to "promote ... our trade, as well as for the discovery of a North West Passage, Copper Mines, etc...." The attempt was a humiliating failure. Two hundred miles northwest of the fort the Indians robbed the white men and left them to reach safety as best they could.

Hearne began again in February 1770, with only native companions. He got three hundred miles inland and four hundred miles north of the Churchill before he was robbed. He turned toward home. Nevertheless, it was the farthest north any European had yet explored inland North America.

On the return to the Churchill, Hearne met Matonabee, an important Chipewyan chief, who offered to guide a third attempt toward the Arctic. Norton agreed and between December 1770 and June 1772 Hearne — again the only white man — headed an expedition across the Barren Grounds. In our day of elaborate preparations for even a minor venture it is difficult to appreciate Hearne's courage. He proposed to, and did, walk overland to the North without any civilized supplies beyond the first few miles. Starvation and death in arctic storms were constant attendants, but in the end he was at the mouth of the Coppermine River on Coronation Gulf. He made only the most cursory search for copper, although he did carry

home a lump of the ore which can still be seen in the British Museum, London.

The Company mounted no follow-up on this sample. Summing up his work, Hearne wrote "... my discoveries are not likely to prove of any material advantage to the Nation ... or ... to the Hudson's Bay Company, yet I have the pleasure to think that I have ... complied with [my] ... orders, and it has put a final end to all disputes concerning a North West Passage through Hudson's Bay."

But he had paid a price. He had watched the butchery of Eskimos at Bloody Falls on the Coppermine River and seen starvation decimate his companions. And he was to see his work sneered at by the scientific and military worlds. Among other criticisms, they said there could be no plant life where he reported because there was none on Greenland in that latitude; the sun could never be visible for twenty-four hours as he said; and the Indians could not possibly roam over such vast areas as he claimed. Eighteen years later Alexander Mackenzie brazenly took credit for being the first European to reach the Arctic by land and disprove the myth of Anian. Nevertheless, between 1819 and 1822 Sir John Franklin covered much of Hearne's route and verified his reports.

When competition from interlopers reduced H.B.C. profits, the Company sent Hearne to establish the successful Cumberland House, not far from The Pas, after which he was recalled to be Chief Factor at Fort Prince of Wales. Profits still fluctuated, Hearne was blamed, and when the Frenchman, La Perouse, challenged the fort in 1782, Hearne surrendered it — an act for which he was branded a coward by his critics. But La Perouse had three ships, 146 guns, and 400 men. Hearne had no ships, 40 guns, and 39 untrained personnel. When La Perouse released his prisoner, the Company sent him back to the Churchill as Chief Factor. Hearne retired to London in 1787 and died there in 1792.

Samuel Hearne was the first European to cross the Barren Grounds to the Arctic and thus prove there is no waterway through our continent. He discovered and charted many major lakes, including Great Slave Lake where Matonabee Point and Hearne Channel credit his work. His record of natural history of the Barren Grounds and the peoples who roamed over them stands unchallenged, and the establishment of Cumberland House saved the great Company from failure and set it on its way to its present eminence as the longest lived commercial venture of all time.

FURTHER READINGS

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