

## John Rae (1813-1893)



Dr. John Rae posed with some of the Franklin relics. Photo from Hudson's Bay Company.

Dr. John Rae, who spent 22 years in British North America, accurately mapped more miles of North America's unknown northern coastline — excluding Hudson Bay — than did any other explorer. A frugal Orkney Islander, his explorations were the most thrifty ever undertaken. Unusually adaptable and a crack shot, he learned native methods of living off the land. Remarkably fit, he set records that have never been surpassed for speed and endurance on snowshoes.

John Rae was born on 30 September 1813 in the Hall of Clestrain, near Stromness in the Orkney Islands. At age 16, he went to Edinburgh to study medicine and qualified as Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1833.

His first medical job was as a surgeon on the *Prince of Wales*, the Hudson's Bay Company supply ship. A sailing ship of 400 tons, it carried 31 Orkneymen bound for employment at distant fur-trading posts. After loading the season's furs at Moose Factory, the *Prince of Wales* was turned back by heavy ice in Hudson Strait and was forced to winter at Charlton Island in James Bay. There, Rae successfully treated his scurvy-afflicted men with cranberries and tender sprouts of the wild pea.

Instead of returning to England, Rae accepted an offer from

the Hudson's Bay Company of five years' employment as "clerk and surgeon." House calls were often arduous; on one occasion he walked nearly 40 km to reach a patient. Another time he walked 170 km to Fort Albany, covering 50 km the first day and 120 km the second. He later commented that "a long day's march on snowshoes is about the finest exercise a man can take."

In 1844, Hudson's Bay Company Governor Sir George Simpson proposed that Rae complete the survey of the northern coastline of North America. After studying surveying in Toronto, Rae left York Factory in June 1846 with ten men and two 22-foot boats. In April 1847 the expedition crossed Rae Isthmus to reach Lord Mayor's Bay, mapping the shore of Simpson Peninsula on the return journey. They then explored the west coast of Melville Peninsula, the two legs adding up to 1,050 km of new coastline mapped. For the most part they lived off the land; Rae shot nearly as much game as the other 12 men together.

Soon after Rae's return, Dr. John Richardson offered him the position of second-in-command on the first search expedition for the missing John Franklin. They left Sault Ste. Marie on 4

May 1848, and in the fastest canoe travel in history they reached the mouth of the Mackenzie River on 3 August. Turning east, Richardson and Rae searched the coast as far as the mouth of the Coppermine River, 1,375 km of coast first explored by Richardson in 1826. They found no trace of Franklin.

Richardson returned home, but Rae attempted another summer of search. Unfortunately, ice conditions prevented him from crossing to Victoria Island. Rae's Eskimo interpreter drowned at Bloody Fall on the Coppermine River that summer, the only fatality in any of his expeditions.

In 1851, Rae set out on his third expedition with two men, two sledges, and five dogs. After crossing Dolphin and Union Strait, they explored 270 new km of Victoria Island coastline on foot. They next used two boats to complete the 740 km of exploration of the southern and eastern shorelines of Victoria Island. When Rae turned back, Franklin's ships *Erebus* and *Terror* were trapped in the ice only about 80 km to the east, although he did not know it. On the return journey, Rae found two pieces of wood that had been parts of a ship, almost certainly one of Franklin's. Continuing on his way home, Rae walked from Fort Chipewyan to Crow Wing, Minnesota — 2,770 km in 54 days.

Rae's fourth and final expedition in 1853 was designed to complete the survey of the continental coastline for the Hudson's Bay Company. He explored the Quoich River for 335 km, wintered at Repulse Bay, and set out in March 1854. At Pelly Bay the Eskimos gave him second-hand news of the fate of the Franklin expedition — other Eskimos had seen dead and dying men about four years earlier. Rae mapped 430 new km of coastline along the west side of Boothia Peninsula, leaving 240 km south of Bellot Strait unexplored. He proved that King William Island was indeed an island, separated from Boothia Peninsula by what is now called Rae Strait.

Back at Repulse Bay, Eskimos brought him a silver plate, a medal, and several forks and spoons with names or initials of Franklin and his officers. Rae did not risk his men in searching further for the bodies of Franklin's men, but instead rushed back to England to recall the other search parties, which were widely scattered in the wrong areas of the Arctic.

When Rae presented his report and his Franklin relics to the Admiralty on 22 October 1854, he forthrightly told of the Eskimo account of cannibalism practised by the British sailors. In spite of strong opposition from Lady Franklin, Rae and his men received the £10,000 reward for ascertaining the fate of Franklin's party.

In 1857 Rae moved to Hamilton, Ontario, where he practised as a surgeon. Two years later he accompanied James Carnegie, Earl of Southesk, to Fort Garry, helping him to make preparations for his prairie hunting trip. Rae married Kate Thompson in Toronto in January 1860 and then returned to England. That year he surveyed for the Atlantic Telegraph Survey, via the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland. In 1861 he guided two wealthy English sportsmen, Henry Chaplin and Sir Frederic Johnstone, on a hunting trip in what is now southern Saskatchewan. His final Canadian expedition, for the Canadian Telegraph Survey, explored the Carlton Trail, the Yellowhead Pass, and the Fraser River in 1864.

After two years in his native Orkney Islands, he and his wife retired to London. He wrote one book, 20 papers, and published 45 letters in *Nature*, but his arctic correspondence, edited by E.E. Rich, was not published until 1953. He received an honorary LL.D. degree from Edinburgh University.

Rae died at his home in London on 22 July 1893, not quite 80 years old. He was interred in the churchyard of St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney Islands, where a fine memorial was later erected by public subscription. His wife, childless, lived until 1919.



Portrait from Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

What were the outstanding characteristics of John Rae? Perhaps one is impressed first by his great physical strength and remarkable powers of endurance. He walked 10,490 km during four exploring expeditions, and he travelled another 10,700 km in small boats. He surveyed and mapped 2,825 km of previously unexplored territory, including 2,480 new km of northern coastline. He was intelligent, an accurate observer, a competent writer, and an accomplished doctor. He was pleasant, cheerful, generous, and sensitive. He was frugal, conducting his surveys more economically than anyone before or since. He was sympathetic to the natives and willing to learn their methods of travel, hunting, and building snow houses. And he was candidly honest to the point of forfeiting the knighthood he so richly deserved.

#### FURTHER READINGS

- RAE, J. 1850. Narrative of an Expedition to the Shores of the Arctic Sea in 1846 and 1847. London: T. and W. Boon.  
RICH, E.E. (ed.). 1953. John Rae's Correspondence with the Hudson's Bay Company on Arctic Exploration, 1844-1855. London: Hudson's Bay Record Society.  
RICHARDS, R.L. 1985. Dr. John Rae. Whitby: Caedmon of Whitby.

C. Stuart Houston  
863 University Drive  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada  
S7N 0J8