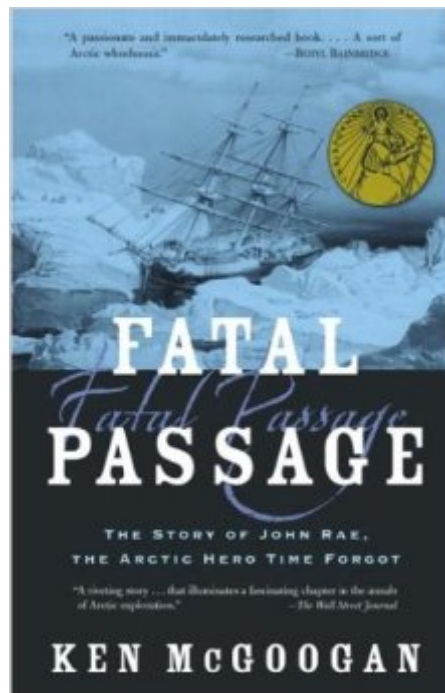


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Fatal Passage: The True Story Of John Rae, The Arctic Hero Time Forgot



Synopsis

John Rae's accomplishments, surpassing all nineteenth-century Arctic explorers, were worthy of honors and international fame. No explorer even approached Rae's prolific record: 1,776 miles surveyed of uncharted territory; 6,555 miles hiked on snowshoes; and 6,700 miles navigated in small boats. Yet, he was denied fair recognition of his discoveries because he dared to utter the truth about the fate of Sir John Franklin and his crew, Rae's predecessors in the far north. Author Ken McGoogan vividly narrates the astonishing adventures of Rae, who found the last link to the Northwest Passage and uncovered the grisly truth about the cannibalism of Franklin and his crew. A bitter smear campaign by Franklin's supporters would deny Rae his knighthood and bury him in ignominy for over one hundred and fifty years. Ken McGoogan's passion to secure justice for a true North American hero in this revelatory book produces a completely original and compelling portrait that elevates Rae to his rightful place as one of history's greatest explorers.

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Customer Reviews

What kind of man, at 45 years of age, slogs 60 kilometres through a Canadian January to give a lecture on icebergs? The Victorian era has endured much hostile press in recent years. Cultural mores have been challenged, essential ideas decried as "social artefacts" and the reputations of heroic idols, nearly universally male, demolished as shams. It's become a novelty to encounter the celebratory resurrection of a forgotten icon. McGoogan relates the life and accomplishments of Scotsman John Rae, who joined a Hudson's Bay Company ship as surgeon, travelled to Canada in 1833 and remained for twelve years - on the first stay. McGoogan has surveyed many of the

resources dealing with Arctic exploration, but Rae's own accounts provide the essential framework for this compelling narrative. The book is nearly two stories in one: Rae's ranging explorations along the Canadian Arctic coast, and the mysterious disappearance of the John Franklin expedition. McGoogan keeps this paired account nicely balanced until they merge to determine Rae's future reputation. John Rae was a departure from the usual explorer of the Victorian age. Instead of heading complex expeditions, he travelled with a small support group. Instead of ships or extensive caravans, he travelled by canoe or small boat, on land using snowshoes. He was extraordinarily hardy, traversing extensive distances, often alone. He adapted many features of Aboriginal life in his travels when "going native" was disdained by most. He kept his associates fed when other British explorers were starving on government rations. He found the route of the elusive Northwest passage and determined the fate of the lost Franklin expedition seeking that route.

McGoogan has written an excellent biography of John Rae that conveys not only the struggles that the explorer went through to find the ill-fated Franklin expedition, but also the scientific banishment that he suffered when he reported the bizarre circumstances of their deaths. Rae was a doctor employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. The HBC had been set up to exploit the vast fur trade in Canada, and had outposts across the North. Rae, an outdoorsman and naturalist, was commissioned to explore the shores of the vast Arctic waters, searching for the last, elusive connection that would allow sailing ships to navigate from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. Many explorers had gone before Rae. One expedition, headed by Sir John Franklin, had disappeared without a trace in the 1840s. Several search parties subsequently failed to find the explorer and his crew. Finally, Rae was asked to search for the party. He set out, not with a large crew and ships, but with a small number of natives and Europeans experienced in traveling in the frozen North. After several years, in which Rae found the last remaining link in the Northwest Passage, he finally uncovered the fate of the Franklin Expedition; the boats had foundered in the ice, and the crew had starved to death while marching south. Rae also uncovered evidence of cannibalism. In their last efforts to remain alive, the crewmen had consumed their dead companions. Rae, in his report, duly noted this observation. Unfortunately, this was to be his undoing. Led by Franklin's widow, Lady Jane, Rae was ostracized from the Royal Geographical Society and his epic discovery of the final link in the Northwest Passage disparaged. For over a century, his achievements languished in the footnotes of history.

Ashamed of my ignorance of the history of our great neighbor to the north, Canadaland, I resolved

to get this book to learn more of one of its greatest unsung heroes. Who, of course, had actually been born in Scotland. But he got over to Canuckia as soon as he could, and stayed a long time. Before going back to Britain. Well...he was still heroic, if not fully Canadian. They certainly built people different back in olden pre-Internet times. These days, of course, most of us regard a trek to our mailboxes as an epic ordeal, but back in the day, it was nothing to go hiking about for miles and miles. Of course, there was no TV, so entertainment options were few, and if you were living in the remote northern Canadian woods for months on end, you really had nothing better to do than hike about and push aside the native peoples to "discover" things. But even amongst the hardy traders and trappers, John Rae was an anomaly. Pretty much, anything you could do, he could do better. I mean, he was a proficient sailor and hunter virutally out of the womb, then became a doctor at a very young age, then rose through the ranks of the Hudson's Bay Company. And the dude could walk! Thirty miles in a day would be a disappointing outing for him. Plus he could totally snowshoe, and he learned all sorts of cool stuff from various Native American tribes and the Inuit. He was like a one-man Winter Olympics, except with somewhat less lugging. We would find him notable for all of his exploring, but what was more remarkable about him was his enlightened attitudes toward the assorted indigenous peoples he encountered.

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