

edinburgh surgeons in search of the north west passage: part 2

In the previous issue *Mark Wilson* described how Harry Goodsir, the Museum Conservator, became involved with the 1845 expedition to traverse the North West Passage, a potential route through the Canadian Arctic. This article describes how John Rae, another Edinburgh Surgeon, while mapping the area, came upon a scene that was to shock Victorian Britain...

john rae

John Rae was born in Clestrain House near Stromness on the Orkney Islands on 30th September 1813. He studied at the University of Edinburgh from 1829 to 1833 and was awarded the LL.D from the College of Surgeons (seven years before Harry). At the age of 22 he became the Surgeon for the Hudson Bay Company and was posted out to Moose Fort where he lived and worked from 1835 to 1845. Rae had rapidly worked his way up to become Chief Trader.

Rae was incredibly hardy, but was not always liked – for example, there was a great deal of opposition when he introduced the use of oars instead of paddles in canoes. To quell debate he organised a race – oars won.

His track record of exploring the arctic was incredible. In the winter of 1844-45, over two months, he travelled 1200 miles on foot from Red River Colony to Sault Ste Marie. While others lost weight, he thrived, gaining two pounds! Between 1846-7, for 15 months he took a party to map the Melville Peninsula wintering on the land at Repulse Bay. No one had ever wintered on land (without food, fuel or even shelter) before. He had learnt a great deal from the Inuits (Eskimos). He travelled light, wore native dress and hunted as he went. He made snow huts for shelter (which he reused on return journeys), used peat and moss for fuel and killed deer for food. No one starved and no one suffered with scurvy. The Inuits admired him and named him Aglooka (“he who



John Rae: incredibly hardy, but not always liked

takes long strides”). Despite his success, the Navy did not approve of him. He was very different to his fellow tweed jacketed countrymen who considered it a disgrace to “go native”. He had no interest in “Christianising” the Eskimos. The Navy resented him for it; he considered the Navy a bunch of self-righteous amateurs.

On returning from this epic 15-month trek Sir John Richardson, of the Admiralty's Arctic Council and one of Franklin's previous team mates, asked Rae back to London. Franklin was lost and Rae was one of the best hopes in finding him. They both went back to Canada together and, with five British seaman and fifteen British soldiers, they set off and searched the area around the Coppermine River. Rae thought very little of the British soldiers or seaman, none of whom had any arctic experience. He stated that they were "in every respect inferior for this kind of duty to the men I had with me in Repulse Bay, both as to strength, activity, willingness to do and knowledge of their work". His prime interest had always been mapping the arctic (for that is what the Hudson Bay Company were paying him). He viewed the search for Franklin as of secondary importance. After searching Coppermine River he attempted to go on to survey Victoria and Wollaston lands for his own mapping interests. His route however he was blocked by ice. Richardson returned to London saying that no trace of Franklin had been found...

In 1850, there was a breakthrough. Horatio Austin on an expedition from the East found two cairns, three temporary buildings and three graves on Beechey Island. Franklin had obviously wintered here. Three deaths so early in an expedition was very unusual. John Torrington (leading stoker) died on 1st January 1846; John Hartnell (able seaman) died on 4th January and William Braine (Royal Marine) died 3rd April. In 1983 these bodies were exhumed. It was apparent that John Torrington had already had a post mortem from an upside down Y incision - down the sternum and then to both iliac crests. Most post mortems are conducted through a Y the right way up. Was Goodsir the pathologist? He would have been very keen to find out what the cause of death was. The studies in 1983 showed evidence of TB (for which he had probably been told that arctic air would be good - being a stoker though wasn't). Torrington's and the other two bodies also had evidence of pneumonias, but most



The three graves found on Beechey Island

interestingly, the bones and hair were also found to have very high lead levels. There was evidence of scurvy and clostridium was grown from bowel flora. None of this was appreciated by Horatio Austin in 1850 though - the question the search parties were asking was "where did they go next?"

In 1851 Rae was sent out again to continue to map Wollaston Land and the rest of Victoria Island. He made his way past Cambridge Bay then up the northeast shore of the island. On his way he found a piece of a flagstaff marked with the Royal Navy's broad arrow and a piece of oak. These probably came from either *Erebus* or *Terror*, but Rae thought nothing of it and reported that he had failed to find Franklin. He had however covered 1,060 miles in 39 days and mapped yet more of the arctic coastline.

By this point Rae was not really interested in finding Franklin - the search had gone on long enough and had cost enough lives and ships. He wanted to continue to map the north Canadian coast for the Hudson Bay Company and to answer the question - Are Boothia and King William Lands peninsulas or islands?



The Canadian Arctic

In August 1853 he arrived at Repulse Bay by boat with six men. He wintered in, then trekked across to Boothia the following year. He showed that Boothia was indeed a Peninsula and that King William Land was an island – to the South of it was Simpson Strait. By doing this he filled in the bit of the map the British Admiralty had failed to complete – the North West Passage did exist.

Rae arrived at Pelly Bay on April 21, 1854. An Eskimo called Innook-poo-zhee-jook met him with some news he thought Rae would be interested in. He said that a few years prior, other Eskimos had found 35-40 white men who had starved to death just west of a large river (which must have been Back Fish River), around 10-12 days walk away. He had proof; his gold-banded cap was from one of the dead men. Rae bought it and said he would pay a good price for any other relics brought to him at Repulse Bay. But why didn't Rae go the 10-12 days to the spot where they had died? He claimed that the Eskimos were reluctant to lead him there and the snow that covered the ground would have made it pointless anyway. He was to be criticised heavily for this later.

Back at Repulse Bay, many Eskimos arrived with a collection of treasures from the Franklin expedition – knives, forks, spoons, plates, watches and most notably Franklin's Knight Commander of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order medal.

He heard more stories of how the men had died in what he estimated to be winter 1850 – their ships had been crushed by ice and they had been seen dragging boats heading south to where there might be deer to shoot. Some of the bodies had been found in tents, others in upturned boats that acted as shelters ... Rae's report ended in words that shocked Victorian Britain....

"from the mutilated state of many of the bodies and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last dread alternative as a means of sustaining life"

Englishmen eating Englishmen? Surely not – had the Eskimos murdered them? Charles Dickens summed up the public mood describing Eskimos as "covetous, treacherous and cruel...with a domesticity of blood and blubber." It would be impossible that the English Navy men "would or could in any extremity of hunger, alleviate the pains of starvation by this horrible means"...

Rae was excoriated and many, especially Lady Jane Franklin, did not believe his report. Despite her protests he was eventually given the £10,000 reward, £2,000 of which went to his team. Parry, Back, Richardson and Franklin all failed to find the North West passage but were all knighted. Rae had found the passage but was a commoner and had gone "native" – no such award was given him. His only accolade was the Founder's Medal of the Geographical Society. His days were not over though; he went on to map a great deal of Canada's interior and in 1860 supervised the laying of a cable between England and America via Faroe, Iceland and Greenland. He died in London in 1893 and is buried in St Magnus's Cathedral, Orkney.

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