

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Fatal Passage

Ken McGoogan

About the Book

The true story of the remarkable John Rae – Arctic traveller and Hudson's Bay Company doctor – *Fatal Passage* is a tale of imperial ambition and high adventure. Rae solved the two great Arctic mysteries: the fate of the doomed Franklin expedition and the location of the last navigable link in the Northwest Passage.

But Rae was to be denied the recognition he so richly deserved. On returning to London, he faced a campaign of denial and vilification led by two of the most powerful people in Victorian England: Lady Jane Franklin, the widow of the lost Sir John, and Charles Dickens, the most influential writer of the age. A remarkable story of courage and determination, *Fatal Passage* is Ken McGoogan's passionate redemption of Rae's rightful place in history. In this richly documented and illustrated work, McGoogan captures the essence of one man's indomitable spirit.

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Fatal Passage

The Untold Story of John Rae, the Arctic
Adventurer Who Discovered the Fate of
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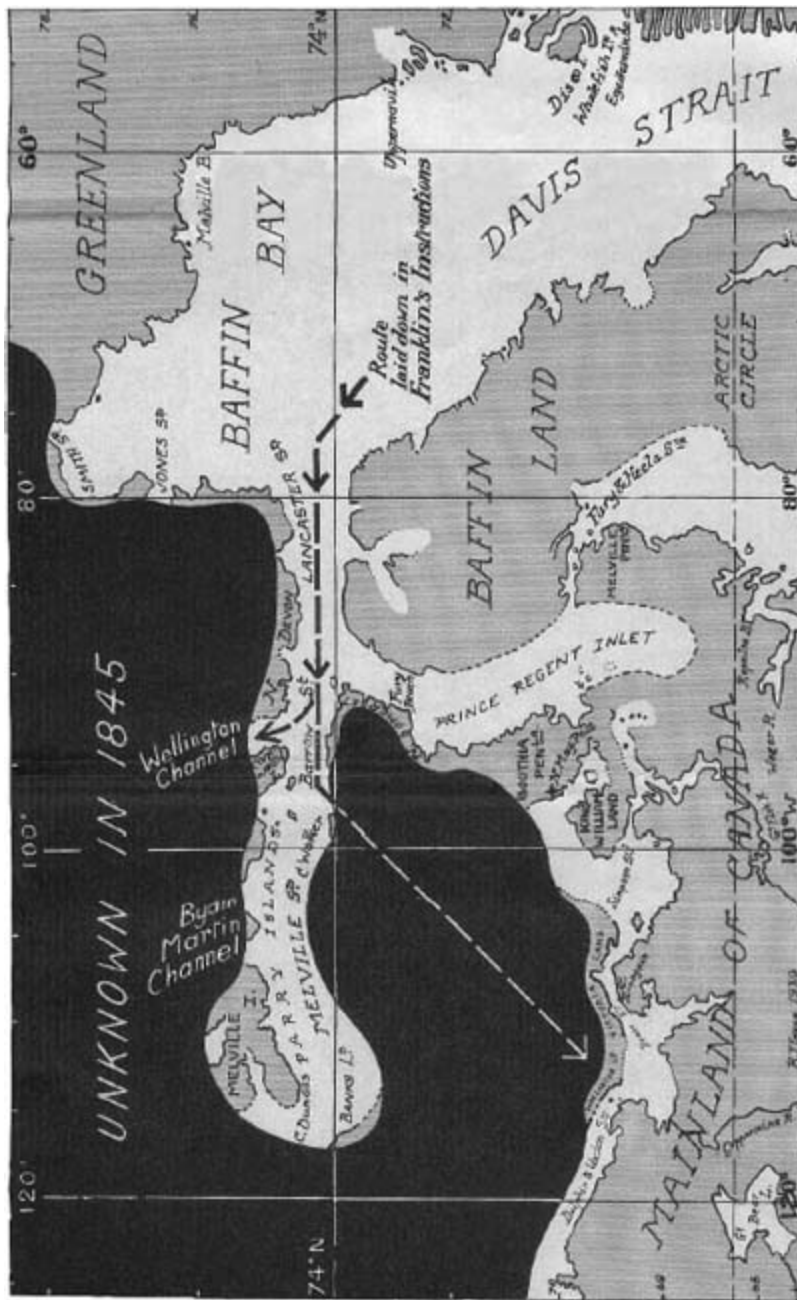
Ken McGoogan

Dedicated to:

*Sheena, Carlin, and Keriann
(my travelling companions)*

and to:

*Phyllis and Louis
(who sent me forth)*



THE NORTH-WEST PASSAGE REGION AS KNOWN IN 1845, WHEN THE FRANKLIN EXPEDITION SAILED



Dr. John Rae (1813-1893), Arctic Explorer, *William Armstrong, Glenbow Collection, Calgary, Canada*

John Rae adapted to harsh northern conditions by adopting native methods. In winter, he often wore a coat of mole or beaver skin with a strip of fur around the cuff. In freezing weather, Rae would add headgear made of young seal skin. In 1862, he donned just such an outfit to pose for a memorable portrait by William Armstrong.

PART ONE

THE TRUTH OF DISCOVERY

A WILD LIFE IN RUPERT'S LAND

IN JUNE 1833, in the rugged Orkney Islands of northern Scotland, a restless, energetic young ship's doctor stood on the deck of a weather-beaten fur-trading vessel as it sailed out of Stromness harbour. Watching the trawlers, pilot boats, and white-sailed pleasure craft of his youth recede into the distance, John Rae—a wiry, broad-shouldered man of middle height—exulted in the salty breeze. At last he was bound for Rupert's Land, the vast wilderness empire ruled by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Two of his older brothers had already sailed with the HBC and finally his own turn had come. Since boyhood, Rae had dreamed of exploring North America—the lakes and rushing rivers, the forests filled with dangerous animals. His father, who managed tenant farmers for a Scottish nobleman, also served as an agent for the HBC, recruiting Orkneymen and sending them west. Those men, and others who preceded them from these rolling, windswept islands, had kept the British fur trade thriving since early in the eighteenth century. Hundreds of them had sailed to Rupert's Land, and now they made up three-quarters of the staff in the territory. Over time, they had earned a reputation as loyal, hard-working employees—sober, obedient, and capable of enduring unusual cold, hunger, and hardship.

Two months earlier, the nineteen-year-old Rae had graduated from medical school in Edinburgh. For four winters, he had attended Edinburgh University, which had

the reputation, in London, of being a hotbed of radical dissent. Having discovered that by transferring to the Royal College of Surgeons he could receive his diploma without waiting until he was twenty, Rae had promptly made the switch.

The four winters he spent in Edinburgh, a bustling city of 160,000, he later described as uneventful: “steady plodding through the various courses of study considered at that time requisite before going up for a surgeon’s diploma.” The young man visited London at least once, but apart from snowball fights between students and town lads, Rae would find little to remember from his Edinburgh years. In April, 1833, after passing an extensive oral examination, he had qualified as a licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons.

Then adventure beckoned. Rae was young, after all, and this was the age of exploration. Since 1816, when the end of the Napoleonic Wars had created a lasting peace, British explorers had been roaming the globe, filling in blanks on the charts and atlases of the day, bent on discovering not only the Northwest Passage but also, in the heart of darkest Africa, Timbuktoo and the mouth of the River Niger. Instead of becoming a small-town doctor in Orkney, or even beginning a practice in Edinburgh, Rae would join the Hudson’s Bay Company as a ship’s surgeon—at least for a season, to see whether he liked it.

All his life, he had watched the Company supply ships, two or three each year, that visited Stromness as their final port of call before crossing the Atlantic. They came to stock up on fresh vegetables and to draw water from Login’s Well in the heart of town, just as they had since the seventeenth century. Rae had grown up hearing a cannon signal the arrival of each supply ship and relishing the excitement at the docks as sailors streamed out of the vessels to enjoy their final leave before crossing the ocean.

Since 1819, Rae's father had been the HBC's chief representative in Orkney. He recruited tradesmen, clerks, and tenant farmers for the trading posts of Rupert's Land, offering them twice the wage an agricultural labourer could earn at home in Orkney. John Rae, Sr., had previously secured clerical postings for two of Rae's older brothers, William in 1827 and Richard in 1830. And it was he who received the letter appointing his son "Jock" surgeon to the *Prince of Wales*.

In June 1833, the three-masted vessel entered the choppy grey waters of Hoy Sound and swung to starboard, and John Rae stood enjoying the stiff breeze and the spray of salt air. As he watched Stromness recede into the distance to the music of creaking masts, cracking halyards, and snapping sails, the young man never once imagined that fourteen years would elapse before he would again see these shores.

Legendary sailors had departed from Stromness before him—Henry Hudson, James Cook, Edward Parry. Twelve years from now, one of the most famous of them all would stand on a deck not unlike this one, on HMS *Erebus*, and gaze out at this same rocky coastline as he sailed to seek the Northwest Passage. But John Rae couldn't know that. Nor could he know that Sir John Franklin's departure would reverberate through the Ocean of Time like an earthquake, generating a tidal wave of catastrophe that would change his own life forever.

Rae was fascinated by sailing vessels of all kinds, and he had thoroughly investigated this sixty-year-old, four-hundred-ton barque, which was one of two supply ships—the other was the *Prince Rupert*—making its annual voyage to Hudson Bay. Its foremost and mainmast sails were square-rigged, its mizzenmast sails fore-and-aft rigged, and it carried a full complement of lifeboats. The broad-beamed ship had rounded sides built of solid oak five to seven feet

thick, and its bow had been reinforced with iron bars against the pack ice.



The Prince Rupert as it would have appeared to John Rae during his first voyage to Hudson Bay on the Prince of Wales

Bound for Moose Factory, the second largest of all HBC ports, the *Prince of Wales* was packed to the gunwhales with provisions and trade goods—everything from nails, muskets, flints, saws, and sealing wax to beads, fish hooks, knives, kettles, and axe heads. Great quantities of food had been carefully stored, including salt beef and pork, cheese, flour, oatmeal, peas, biscuits, malt, vinegar, raisins, butter, lemons, and spices, along with a notable supply of alcohol—cases of wine, rum, and French brandy for the chief factor at Moose Factory and, for the majority of men, kegs of “English brandy,” really cheap London gin coloured with molasses. As a medical man who understood the need for fresh meat, Rae also noted with approval in his journal that the ship carried “several coops filled with a variety of poultry for the cabin mess; in the long-boat half a dozen sheep; and there was a pen of five young pigs forward.”

Besides this miscellaneous cargo, the ship carried several passengers in the cabins aft and another thirty-five or forty

in “the ’tween decks forward.” Those in cabins, including Rae, enjoyed civilized meals with the captain and his officers (fresh trout and poultry, followed by the finest French wines). The steerage passengers, who ate mainly salt beef and pork, included thirty-one men from Orkney, the largest number in a decade to leave those northern islands.

Crowded into a stinking, unventilated space not more than five feet high, these men slept in hammocks and rough wooden berths that lined the walls, their baggage piled around them. From the outset, Rae worried about these conditions. Some of the men suffered seasickness, rendering their normally fetid quarters more wretched still. Worse, shortly after leaving Orkney, typhoid fever broke out among the steerage passengers and many became seriously ill. For two weeks, the anxious, inexperienced doctor spent most of his time, day and night, below decks, ministering to the sick. Later, with characteristic understatement, he wrote, “Fortunately, they were all a strong and healthy lot of young fellows and recovered very rapidly.”

When he wasn’t tending the sick, the nimble, irrepressible Rae explored the rigging. He badgered sailors and officers to teach him the name and use of every rope, block, and stick on the ship and to train him to tie various knots and splices—knowledge he would later put to good use.

Early in July, after crossing the North Atlantic and passing south of Greenland, the *Prince of Wales* entered Hudson Strait. Here, south of Baffin Island in the only entrance to Hudson Bay, Rae encountered Arctic seas. He saw his first icebergs and marvelled at their grandeur, their “beauty and purity, vastness and variety.” Often larger even than the ships, with miniature cataracts flowing from their peaks, they sparkled white and green in the sunlight. Some boasted so many columns, arches, and spires that they resembled glorious cathedrals. Rae felt that he would never

tire of standing on deck while the ship threaded its way through the serpentine canals that opened among them. But then the canals narrowed and disappeared, the pack ice grew thicker and finally halted all progress, and the young doctor found his pleasure in observation waning while the *Prince of Wales* sat for days in the same spot.



Voyagers entering Hudson Strait for the first time were invariably impressed by icebergs

For two weeks, a mile and a half apart, the HBC ships remained beset. The ice was so thick and firm that passengers, among them two English ladies, walked back and forth to visit, enjoying the novelty and welcoming the chance to stretch their legs on something other than a deck. The enterprising Rae climbed the mainmast of the *Prince of Wales* and declared that he could not find a single pool of open water. When at last the ice broke up thanks to a rising wind, dozens of Inuit arrived at the ships in kayaks, proclaiming friendship even from a distance: “*Chimo! Chimo! Friends!*” Rae judged these Baffin Islanders to be harmless and good-natured, though noisy. They traded seal oil and walrus-tusk ivory for knives, files, axe heads,

needles, beads, and hoop iron—all items brought for this purpose.

After finally navigating Hudson Strait and entering the Bay, the two ships separated, each making for a different HBC fort, or “Factory,” so named to indicate the presence of a chief agent or factor. The *Prince Rupert* crossed the Bay to York Factory, the largest and most important of the HBC’s fur-trading posts, while the *Prince of Wales*, with John Rae aboard, sailed 870 miles south to James Bay and Moose Factory, which was located on an island in the Moose River. The ship arrived on September 7, 1833, roughly two weeks late, and put in at Ship’s Hole, an anchorage seven miles out from the fort, passable only at high tide.

This late arrival meant a rush even more desperate than usual. Small boats ferried back and forth, night and day, unloading cargo and stowing furs for the return voyage, now threatened by the onset of winter. On shore, Rae encountered HBC officers sporting vests, jackets, and even three-piece suits. The Company’s rough-and-ready labourers looked better adapted to the rugged environment. Rae admired the panache of the French-speaking *voyageurs* decked out in calf-high moccasins, hooded frock coats, tall hats, and colourful sashes, and he secretly envied the deerskin outfits of the natives who served the fur trade using rivers as highways to transport a kind of gold from the animal-rich wilderness around the Bay.

When he saw an opportunity, Rae stepped forward to lend a hand. The chief factor at Moose Factory, John George MacTavish, noticed the young man’s energy and wide-eyed enthusiasm and invited him to remain at the post as a doctor. Tempted, Rae nevertheless demurred: his friends and family expected him home, especially his mother. MacTavish also presented the young doctor with an Indian birchbark canoe for performing some notable medical service. Rae had little opportunity to test this intriguing

craft, however; on September 24, just seventeen days after arriving, he boarded the *Prince of Wales* and sailed for home.

At the entrance to Hudson Strait between Southampton Island and Point Wolstoneholme, the ship encountered a sailor's Arctic nightmare: a barrier of pack ice. For several days, the *Prince Rupert* had been exploring the ice edge without finding any opening. Now, John Rae stood on deck watching as the captains of the two sturdy-hulled ships tried repeatedly to breach the ice wall to no avail. Finally, bitterly disappointed—not least because they would forego their bonuses for making a single-season passage—the captains turned their ships around.

York Factory was overburdened and under-supplied, so the *Prince Rupert* made for the more northerly Churchill, 350 miles west across the Bay. That small outpost would not be able to sustain more than a single crew of unexpected visitors, however, so the *Prince of Wales*, with two feet of ice on her foredeck and a great deal more clinging to her bows, made for Charlton Island at the bottom of the Bay, 800 miles away. As the old ship beat south driven by fierce gales, Rae observed that “every rope of our standing rigging was so thickly coated with ice as to be two or three times its natural size. The sea washing over our forecastle was frozen there to the depth of two feet, which together with the ice clinging to our bows set us down two or three feet by the head, and made the ship for a time most difficult to steer.”

Charlton Island, an inhospitable depot seventy miles north of Moose Factory, remained accessible (unlike Moose Factory itself) despite the lateness of the season and the encroaching ice. The *Prince of Wales* had wintered there as recently as 1830-31, but the post had since been abandoned. Rae and his thirty-or-so fellow voyagers found the ground covered in deep snow, the woods almost empty of animals. After exploring the dreary scattering of tumbledown log-and-frame houses, most without windows

and roofs, the new arrivals erected an immense tent using sails and spars from the ship and trees from the surrounding forests. Here they stored the ship's cargo of furs, mainly beaver and muskrat, but also bear, lynx, marten, mink, fisher, otter, wolf, wolverine, and various kinds of fox (silver, cross, red, and white).

After beaching the ship, the men set to work repairing the ramshackle houses, using clay to plaster the seams—though already temperatures were so low that the mud froze and cracked. The captain sent a lifeboat to Moose Factory with news that the ship's crew was wintering over and with two paying passengers who had been returning to England. The boat came back carrying salted geese, blankets, warm clothing, and moosehide for moccasins, and the men settled unhappily into their cramped quarters.

John Rae met the change of plans with equanimity, even pleasure. "Personally, I enjoyed the situation immensely," he would write, citing the novelty of the experience and the idea of having abundant fine, dry snow on which to go snowshoeing, though initially he was skeptical of this footwear. The lure of hunting unfamiliar game also enticed him, and he started with geese and wild duck. This adventuring he found "extremely attractive, a feeling which was not altogether shared by the older portion of our party."

During the cold, hard winter that ensued, the young doctor would have ample opportunity to discover how well equipped he was to cope with the exotic ferocity of Rupert's Land: his outdoorsy youth in Orkney had prepared him to flourish in just such an environment, to overcome challenges that could kill men who were less well suited—and on this occasion, flourish he would.

The rocky, wind-swept islands of Orkney lie, as poet and native son George Mackay Brown would have it, "like sleeping whales . . . beside an ocean of time." Dotted with Neolithic remains dating back over 5,500 years—including

stone houses complete with shelving units and linked by covered passages—these seventy-four islands present an atmosphere of palpable antiquity. The roughly 20,500 people here, unique in the British Isles, are strongly connected to Norway and France by history (through a Norse conquest over 1,000 years ago) and heritage (through the families of the *jarls*, or earls). This singular history, according to Peter St. John, the current earl of Orkney, “has produced a rational, independent citizenry that is egalitarian in outlook and perfectly at home abroad.”

Located off the north coast of Scotland, which annexed the islands in 1472, Orkney lies almost directly east of the southern tip of Greenland and the entrance to Davis Strait. This meant that early voyagers, lacking the instrumentation to calculate longitude, could simply sail due west from Stromness. The Vikings had discovered the great natural harbour there during the first millennium. Whalers, sealers, explorers, fur traders—Stromness eventually served them all. Late in the sixteenth century, while seeking the Northwest Passage, the buccaneering explorer Martin Frobisher put in many times at Stromness; early in the seventeenth century, Henry Hudson watered at Login’s Well before embarking on his final, tragic voyage. By 1816, Stromness was supplying fresh water to more than thirty-four whalers a year.

Early in the eighteenth century, fur-trading ships from the Hudson’s Bay Company, already in the habit of stopping for water and food, began recruiting Orcadians to serve in the fur-trade posts of Rupert’s Land. These new employees proved to be not only hardy, industrious, and egalitarian, but also remarkably adept as fishermen and boatmen. Between 1772 and 1800, while it was gradually taking greater control of its empire, the HBC expanded its labour force from 180 to just under 600, fully three-quarters of whom were Orcadian. The first HBC surveyor, an Englishman

named Philip Turnor, described Orcadians as “a set of the best men I ever saw together, as they are obliging, hardy, good canoe men.” Most could also read and write, while other Scots and English boys often could not, and so they made excellent keepers of journals and records. The Orcadians also impressed the Cree and the Chipewyan, whose languages they often mastered and with whom they freely intermarried.

Stromness (population 2,200), which perches on Hamnavoe or “Haven Bay” and overlooks the natural harbour of Scapa Flow, can today be reached with relative ease. Visitors can travel north from Edinburgh by train or road to the tiny port of Scrabster and there catch an ultra-modern ferry. The *St. Ola*, for example, accommodates 500 passengers and 180 vehicles and can make its way to Stromness even through heavy seas in two and a half hours. Or, visitors can fly into the bustling Orkney capital of Kirkwall (population 7,500), less than fifteen miles away, and reach Stromness over a winding two-lane highway.

For John Rae, growing up here early in the nineteenth century, travelling was more difficult. Even in 1830, when he was seventeen, the only way to journey between Orkney and the Scottish mainland was by sailing packet. During the stormy winter months, these small vessels would be forced to take a roundabout route and would often require several weeks to make the voyage. The only alternative was to risk one’s life crossing the treacherous Pentland Firth in the tiny, open boat that carried the mails.

Far more accessible than it once was, the Stromness that Rae knew remains everywhere in evidence in today’s cosy, salty-aired warren of stone buildings and narrow, winding, flagstone streets. From many vantage points in town, a contemporary visitor can see Rae’s boyhood home, the Hall of Clestrain, two and a half miles across the Bay of Ireland. Originally a laird’s dwelling, this impressive stone mansion,

now in considerable disrepair, stands alone on a hill looking out over rolling fields and rough waters.



The Hall of Clestrain, where Rae was born, today shows the ravages of time

John Rae was born on September 30, 1813, in this dwelling, as the sixth child (there would be three more) and fourth son of John Rae, Sr., a “ferrylouper,” or newcomer, who had arrived from Lanarkshire, south of Glasgow. A driving, self-made man whose gravestone would identify him as “esquire of Wyre Island,” Rae’s father served as a factor, or land agent, to Sir William Honeyman, Lord Armadale, one of the most powerful men in northern Scotland.

In Orkney, where most families eked out a living on the land, the gentrified Raes were sufficiently prominent that in 1814, while researching his novel *The Pirate*, Sir Walter Scott came calling in a lighthouse yacht. Eventually, he modelled two characters, Brenda and Minna, after Rae’s two older sisters. “I was very young at the time,” Rae wrote later, “but the ‘great unknown’ took early lunch and got ‘mounts’ to ride over to the Stones of Stennis [an ancient

archaeological site] and the cathedral in Kirkwall, about fourteen miles distant.”

In his diary, after admiring the well-cultivated farm and the excellent breed of horses that the factor was breeding (“strong, hardy Galloways, fit for labour or hacks”), Scott mentioned that Rae’s father was responsible for 300 tenant farmers, the vast majority of whom lived in small, windowless, dirt-floored dwellings built of stone and turf. The menfolk fished and hunted whales, seals, birds, and small game, grew barley and potatoes, and kept cattle and sheep, yet they still battled frequent food shortages.

From birth, then, the explorer-to-be was set apart. But young Rae showed no signs of feeling superior, revelling instead in the same pursuits as the sons of tenant farmers. A solitary youth who thrived on physical challenge, Rae enjoyed fishing, hiking, riding, shooting, rock scrambling, cliff climbing, and boating in rough waters. He hunted birds on the water and in swamps, seals that turned up on the nearby rocks, and, most exciting and rarest of all, the occasional whale that strayed into Hoy Sound.

John Rae, Sr., provided his sons with two excellent boats on condition that they maintain them in pristine shape. One was small, light, and handy for fishing and served as a tender to the other, an eighteen-foot yawl called the *Brenda*. Rigged with a jib, foresail, mainsail, and mizzen or jigger, she was both fast and safe. As the fourth oldest brother, Rae started sailing at the jib sheet and worked his way aft. The *Brenda* could be hard to handle in the sudden squalls that are so frequent in Orkney, but Rae found that when he took her out alone in bad weather, the boat worked beautifully under the reefed foresail and small rigger aft.

Rae and his brothers were wildly proud of the *Brenda*, which could outrun almost anything her own size. To take the boat neatly through high tides in half a gale of wind “gave us I fancy about the same amount of pleasure as a good rider mounted on a favourite horse feels in crossing a

difficult country with a lot of bad jumps over water, wall and fence." Rae sailed through snow, sleet, and gale-force winds. He thought nothing of enduring wet and cold all day and never dreamed of donning a waterproof coat.

The Rae brothers not only raced against town boys from Stromness, but also competed with men sailing pilot boats, which were longer and built for speed. "There was tremendous rivalry between us boys and these brave and experienced boatmen; we had no chance with them in fine weather . . . but whenever it blew hard and the sea was especially rough we never lost an opportunity of racing; and generally went ahead much to the chagrin of our big opponents and to the gratification of the boys."

Before Rae reached his teens, his father gave him an old flintlock that he could hardly lift. The boy made holes at carefully chosen points in the stone wall that circled the farm, and, using these apertures as gunrests, began hunting heron, curlews, wild ducks, golden plover, and other small game. He found an excellent grouse moor within a five-minute run of the house. After school hours and during holidays, he would scamper off with his musket and dog, a pointer named Carlo, returning later to add two or three brace of grouse to the family larder. By the age of fifteen, Rae had become an excellent hunter, rock climber, and hiker. He often swung home across the moors carrying a hefty load of game on his back and waving proudly to anyone he met.

Later the youth would beam when the family sat down at the great, long, wooden table to eat a dinner that he had provided. His father, stern and preoccupied, would say grace, and then his mother, refined and gracious, would watch carefully from the opposite end of the table to see that the smallest children, scattered among the hungry teenagers and young adults, received their fair share of food.

As the credulous sixth child in a high-spirited family, Rae had to endure more than the usual amount of teasing—though often his mother would leap to his defence: “I have mentioned sensitiveness and credulity as two of my many weak points, the latter, I think, being extensive, because I could not imagine or understand any one telling an untruth, more especially for no other apparent reason than the raising of a laugh. I was therefore constantly being hoaxed. . . .”

John Rae, like his siblings, received a private education. A resident governess gave way to a succession of live-in tutors, one of whom kept pet eagles, which demanded a steady supply of small birds for food—birds the boy was happy to provide. Later Rae would regret never having had the advantage of attending a grammar school and of studying among other young people, but he contrived to learn enough that at age sixteen, avid to escape into the wider world, he travelled south to Edinburgh to begin training as a doctor.

Nineteenth-century sailors who visited the shores of Hudson Bay, from the captains to the lowliest cabin boys, felt superior to those who lived ashore and detested having to do so themselves. In the autumn of 1833, experienced hands also knew that winter at Charlton Island would bring short days, freezing cold, howling gales, and fierce blizzards. Above all, they feared scurvy, long the scourge of maritime expeditions. Caused by a lack of vitamin C, the disease was not yet understood, though its symptoms were all too familiar: loose teeth, blackened gums, stiff joints, internal bleeding, and, if not treated, an extremely painful death.



On Charlton Island, Rae hunted ptarmigan, geese, and wild duck

As the winter dragged on into 1834, most of the marooned men spent their time sheltering in the drafty cabins, wrapped in furs and huddled around large, iron, wood-burning stoves. Without fresh fruits and vegetables, they survived on biscuits and salt meat. Rae used his hunting skills to supply what fresh game he could, but ptarmigan, geese, and wild duck remained scarce until spring. Before long, the thirty men ran out of lemon juice, and half of them began showing symptoms of scurvy.

Rae drew on his medical training to comfort the men and combat the baffling disease as best he could. Decades before its discovery, he deduced the existence of vitamin C. Later he reported, “I consider scurvy a blood disease caused by the lack of something that it gets from vegetables and that when you have no vegetables or no bread there is something that the system wants which is in very small quantities in animal food and therefore you have to eat a very great deal more than you want to get at the quantity from meat.”

Rae tried making spruce beer, a concoction well-known to HBC men—and mentioned in James Lind’s classic medical

text *A Treatise of the Scurvy*, published in 1753—by boiling spruce branches and adding sugar. He did not find this effective, however, probably because boiling destroyed the vitamin C contained in the young spruce shoots.

Four or five of the sick men ended up in terrible shape, barely able to crawl about, their limbs swollen and discoloured, their gums dark purple and bleeding, their teeth so loose they could be removed by hand: “In fact, one fine humorous fellow named Letham missed two of his [teeth] one morning and could only account for their disappearance by asserting that, ‘By Jove, I must have swallowed ‘em, sir,’ with a grin at the thought of making such a use of his own best grinders.”

Over forty years later, giving evidence before an Admiralty committee investigating scurvy, Rae would paint a grim picture of how two men, the captain and the first mate, died that winter:

The only case that was exceptional was that of the captain, but he had, I think, something wrong with his lungs; so far as I can remember he had oedematous swelling of his legs. I do not think his mouth was affected but clearly it was scurvy combined with some other disease that he died of. The chief mate died also in the most fearful state that I ever saw. His skin was perfectly black, his mouth black, his saliva was as dark as ink and the odour from him was so horrible that there was no person could come near him but myself. . . . These two men I believe had taken more spirits than were good for them, and consequently it was no wonder they were more affected than the other men.

While most of the healthy men, fearing contagion, refused to approach their sick comrades, the unflinching Rae manifested not only an iron constitution, but also, for an untried doctor, singular dedication and resolve. In his unpublished memoir, he noted that poor Mr. Terry, the first mate, died after lingering “in a terrible state—his mouth and tongue were black; his saliva as black as night, his limbs all purple, and latterly terribly wasted. The effluvia from his body was so offensive that no one could lift him out of or

into bed except myself, who was then a young lad of twenty, not particularly squeamish.”

Realizing that some readers might find such a description harrowing, Rae added that the graphic details were chiefly intended for medical or surgical brethren, should any of them happen to look at his narrative. Alluding to the cheap “English brandy” distributed to most HBC men, he added that he did not know in 1834, as he later learned by experience, that alcohol in any form was injurious in a cold climate: “I abstained at that time from drinking my allowance of grog (my associates invariably drank all theirs) not because I thought it distasteful or hurtful, but because I had an idea it might be more useful to others . . . as liniments or stimulants.” Rae himself remained perfectly healthy throughout the winter, with the exception of a toothache that bothered him mainly at night.

Early in the spring, as the weather warmed, Rae made soup from the tender sprouts of the vetch, or wild pea. Out snowshoeing near the woods one afternoon, typically alone and searching for these sprouts, he noticed some red-stained snow and thought he had discovered blood. Looking more closely, he realized that he had crushed some cranberries underfoot. The resourceful doctor began gathering them to feed to his scurvy patients, while “those who could hobbled to the cranberry ground.” Scurvy responds well to treatment, and soon most of the sick men had recovered. Had the ground on their arrival not been so deeply covered in snow, Rae might have found the cranberries early enough to prevent much suffering and perhaps even to save the two men who died.

In mid-June 1834, undaunted by the misery of the long winter—the captain and the first mate lay buried in humble graves marked by wooden crosses—Rae unpacked the birchbark canoe he had received the previous autumn from Chief Factor MacTavish. As the ice cleared along the

shoreline, he led two companions in a four-day, ninety-mile journey around Charlton Island. For a young man used to boats, travelling by canoe was both exciting and challenging. By the end of the trip, Rae had progressed from novice to journeyman and intended to become a master.

In mid-July, the men hauled the *Prince of Wales* off the beach and restowed the Company's furs. Toward the end of the month, just as a forest fire broke out, they sailed south for Moose Factory. There Rae learned that during the winter, the chief factor had used the overland express to Montreal—men travelling mostly on snowshoes—to send letters to his family in Orkney, advising them that he wished to hire and retain the young doctor. The responses, Rae wrote, “left me at perfect liberty of choice.” MacTavish had also communicated with Sir George Simpson, the HBC governor, who had responded by proposing for Rae a five-year contract as clerk and surgeon.

MacTavish reported to Simpson that Rae would agree to remain for only two years exclusively as a surgeon and “cannot be prevailed upon to become a counting-house clerk.” MacTavish added, “He is a very attentive and pleasant young man, hardy and well-adapted to the country; however, he only wishes to feel his way and may in time take a notion of remaining.” Rae would indeed take such a notion. He would spend the next ten years at Moose Factory, assuming a variety of duties and responsibilities and mastering the intricacies of the fur trade.

On August 12, 1834, however, when from shore he watched the *Prince of Wales* sail for Orkney without him, carrying letters and tokens for his family, especially for his mother, John Rae knew only that he felt fiercely attracted to “the wild sort of life to be found in the Hudson's Bay Company service.” At the first major crossroads of his life, he had struck off down the less trodden path, embarking on

a singular journey that would make him arguably the greatest Arctic explorer of the century.

