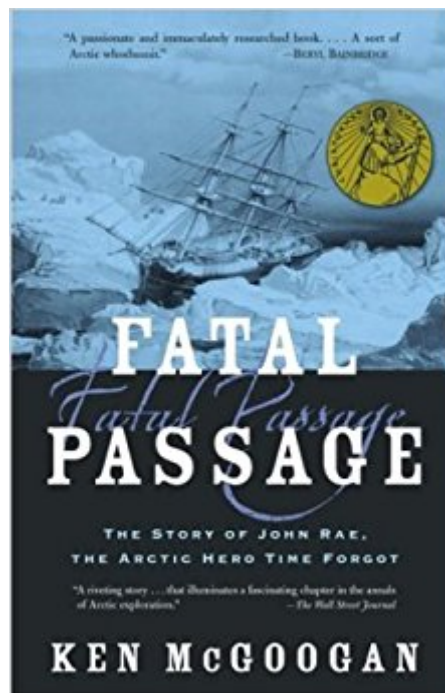




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# Fatal Passage: The True Story Of John Rae, The Arctic Hero Time Forgot



## 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

In the spring of 1854, John Rae, a Scottish immigrant to Canada, led a small party of explorers across the Boothia Peninsula to map the missing link in the fabled Northwest Passage. That signal accomplishment, along with Rae's other contributions to Canadian and world geography, should have earned him glory. Instead, Ken McGoogan tells us, Rae faded from the record. Rae's trouble, McGoogan writes, came from unpleasant reports that he filed about the fate of an earlier expedition, led by Sir John Franklin, whose remains he discovered along the way. Lost "in a hummocky wasteland of yawning crevasses and ten-foot pressure ridges assailed by blizzards and blowing

snow," the unfortunate party--or so Inuit hunters reported to Rae--resorted to eating the dead. The news scandalized Victorian society, drawing vigorous objections from none other than Charles Dickens, who argued that proper British heroes were incapable of such acts and had to have been done in by the Inuit themselves. Rae, the messenger, was effectively killed by the tidings he brought, and written out of the history books. In this insightful and adventure-packed book, McGoogan restores Rae's name to the long roster of heroes of Arctic exploration. --Gregory McNamee

Novelist and journalist McGoogan (*Kerouac's Ghosts*) combines deft storytelling with 19th-century period detail in this gripping account of "arguably the greatest Arctic explorer of the century." McGoogan shows how Rae became a Scottish hero by solving the two great mysteries of 19th-century Arctic exploration: "he discovered both the fate of the Franklin expedition and the final navigable link in the Northwest Passage, at last connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans across the top of North America." But the bulk of the book details how this accomplishment was unjustifiably turned against Rae. Although Sir John Franklin's earlier, 1845 attempt to find the final Northwest Passage link was "the most expensive naval expedition ever mounted" by England, it ended with the mysterious disappearance of Franklin and his entire crew. During Rae's later, successful expedition, he found proof that Franklin's crew was dead and had cannibalized their dying mates in a failed attempt to survive. When Franklin's wealthy widow, Lady Jane, began a smear campaign against Rae, she enlisted the help of Charles Dickens to write articles arguing that the Inuit "savages" who had helped Rae discover the bodies must have been the cannibals. McGoogan's extensive research reveals compelling evidence that Franklin's crew and not the Inuits were cannibals. Although Rae's accomplishments were not fully appreciated in his time, McGoogan's fascinating account should help to give Rae his rightful place in the history of Arctic explorations. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

"Fatal Passage" is a celebratory examination of the life, accomplishments, and struggles for recognition of arctic explorer John Rae. Ken McGoogan admits in the introduction that he is a bit of a sycophant when it comes to the subject of Rae and is guilty of "cheer-leading." His book, proclaiming Rae as a hero, was first published in the author's native Canada, a nation that appreciates understatement. After the events of 9/11, McGoogan was determined to have his book published in the United States and declare Rae an American hero on the level of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. This reviewer is not certain as to why Rae would be a hero in the United States when

he was born off the north coast of Scotland in Orkney and made his mark in the Arctic and what would become Canada. What 9/11 had to do with the Hudson's Bay Company explorer is also unclear, but such is how the author introduced his book. John Rae was definitely an impressive figure and perhaps the greatest explorer of his time. He began his career as a doctor treating scurvy and deduced the importance of Vitamin C before its discovery (pg. 16). He led the first expedition to winter above the tree line of the Arctic Circle. He was highly innovative in his exploration techniques (Vilhjalmur Stefansson wrote that "Rae was as new as Darwin") and, like Amundsen after him, adopted Inuit methods like building igloos and coating sledge runners with moss and snow. An excellent boatman, Rae was also indefatigable on snowshoes. He mapped out much of the northern coast, determining Boothia Felix was a peninsula and not an island as originally thought (key in finding the Northwest Passage). Most notably, he proved the fate of the Franklin Expedition through relics and native encounters and found the gateway to the elusive Northwest Passage between Boothia Peninsula and King William Island. Rae's accomplishments speak for themselves, but McGoogan defends him to a level of superhero status and polishes any chink in the armor. Rae exhibited a great respect for the Inuit, some things he wrote were ahead of their time in terms of cultural sensitivity (pg. 31). Still, McGoogan goes out of his way to explain why Rae renamed geographical landmarks which already sported native designations (pg. 74). When mentioning Rae's sexual encounters with native women, McGoogan points out that Rae would have to be "freakish" to have resisted. Rae was a man. Such activities are expected. In the rare instances when Rae made an error in judgment or was not successful in achieving a goal, McGoogan almost comes off as an apologist or overly builds up the experience: "Rae would face so many challenges that, in retrospect, it looks as if fate wished to test both his abilities and his resolve" (pg. 44). McGoogan's pro-Rae analysis is highly effective, though, when examining the reaction to Rae's report regarding the fate of the Franklin Expedition. The shocking details of his discoveries caused his reputation to be unfairly attacked by Lady Jane Franklin. Charles Dickens also went on the attack, not so much against Rae, but against the natives whose stories Dickens believed lacked credibility. Lady Franklin's persistent criticism damaged Rae's standing. He was never knighted as so many other explorers were and the praise which should have gone to him was lavished on Lady Franklin's last funded explorer Francis Leopold McClintock, who only confirmed Rae's findings. The book ends with the author making a trek to visit the remains of a cairn left by Rae when he discovered the link to the Northwest Passage. "Fatal Passage" is a convincing examination that extols John Rae as one of the greatest, if under-appreciated, Arctic explorers in history. McGoogan, at times, does put Rae on a rather high pedestal and, therefore, opens the door to critics to charge

him with being overly bias in his analysis. He, at least, admits it, though. Otherwise, "Fatal Passage" is an excellent account of Rae's achievements and the political intrigue that caused him to not gain the legendary status he may have deserved.

Great book - should be taught in grade schools

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. Whereas your average Victorian regarded the original inhabitants of North America with, at best, amused contempt, Rae realized that they were perfectly adapted to their environment and that they could teach him a great deal about how to survive in the far north. Consequently, whilst various British expeditions to find the Northwest Passage, and then to find the vanished Sir John Franklin and company, were blundering about the Arctic, crashing and sinking and starving and freezing, Rae was moving about with comparative ease and was seldom in any jeopardy. His major accomplishments were to discover the final link of an ice-free navigable Northwest Passage and to uncover word at long last about the Franklin Expedition, which he basically did by the simple expedient of asking some passing Inuit, "Hey, what happened to Franklin?" Unfortunately for Rae, the truth was not palatable to his waiting British audience. As it turns out, the crews of Franklin's ships had been forced to abandon their icebound ships to set off

on a doomed trek to reach a far-distant trading outpost, mysteriously declining to head toward a much closer and more easily accessible known cache of supplies left by a previous group of explorers. But it was the news of the extremities to which they had been forced that most upset the public. At least some of the Franklin Expedition had resorted to cannibalism (which assertion has subsequently been proved in modern times by forensic analysis of some of the remains later discovered scattered here and there across the Canadian coast). It was easier for the outraged British to claim that Rae was a liar or a fool and that the Inuit had either murdered the Franklin crews or selfishly hogged all the caribou to themselves and declined to help the starving explorers. It never really sunk in for most of Rae's critics that the Inuit weren't exactly carting around surplus tons of food or that the land wasn't at all capable of supporting dozens and dozens of people at a time. And so the vilification of Rae began in earnest, orchestrated by the Widow Franklin and ably abetted (to his eternal shame) by one Charles Dickens. This is a handsomely illustrated volume with an assortment of helpful maps. Since it was originally published in Canada, to some very minor degree it presupposes that the reader has some small knowledge of certain Canadian-type things, but that's only the most insignificant of impediments to American readers. My real quibble is that the author sometimes takes an overly novelistic approach in describing certain scenes (down to details of facial expressions) and recreating dialogue. The bibliography is slim and I would've felt on more solid ground had he better documented his materials for some of these "you are there" passages. Also, his forward for the American edition is so unabashed in its effusive praise for Rae that it spirals at the end into a quasi-hysterical screed for public worship of this great man. He would have been better advised to follow the basic rule of "show, don't tell", and let us draw our own conclusion without demanding our obeisance to all things Rae. Still, this is a most entertaining and well-told tale of a figure who indeed deserves much greater acclaim and a more prominent place in the annals of Arctic exploration.

I bought this book several years ago, read it twice and loaned it out; and never got it back. I bought it again to read at least one more time. The Story of John Rae is well written and shows the strength that few people have. The man was superman! I can't imagine any explorer of today, with all the modern aids, even remotely approaching the things John Rae did. I am so glad Mr. McGoogan wrote this book to highlight the life of a really great man!

A biography of John Rae in more capable hands could have been a fantastic read. This is a mediocre presentation. Informative but annoyingly contrite and difficult to read unless you enjoy

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