

Solange De Santis

Fatal Passage: The Untold Story of John Rae, the Arctic Adventurer Who Discovered the Fate of Franklin, Ken McGoogan,
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One of the most engaging aspects of “Fatal Passage” is in reading an author who has so obviously fallen in love with his subject, the little-known Arctic explorer John Rae. Even more delicious, journalist Ken McGoogan is outraged and means to show that Rae has been unjustly denied his place in history as the discoverer of the last link of the Northwest Passage and of the fate of the tragic Franklin expedition. McGoogan backs up his enthusiasm with a riveting narrative and solid research that illuminate a fascinating and overlooked contribution to the annals of Arctic exploration.

Born in Scotland, in 1813, Rae as a young man entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company as a doctor and sailed for Canada. Blessed with a sturdy constitution, buoyed by years of hunting and fishing in his youth, he learned the outdoors skills of the Indians and Inuit while working at the company’s outposts on the shores of Hudson’s Bay. A broad-shouldered, handsome man of extraordinary physical endurance, Rae once hiked 1,200 miles on snowshoes in two months.

The company asked Rae to undertake several Arctic mapping explorations along the western shore of Hudson’s Bay and into the Arctic between 1846 and 1854. During those trips, traveling with native companions whose names were always carefully noted, he used the ways of the natives (such as igloo-building). Using the testimony of the Inuit, later derided in Victorian England, he discovered that Sir John Franklin’s attempt to find a navigable Northwest Passage had ended in starvation and cannibalism. He also discovered the last link of the Passage, an achievement for which other explorers tried to claim credit, McGoogan writes.

The subtitle of the book indulges in a bit of publishing hype -- Rae’s story has been told in at least two previous books and he did receive much recognition in his lifetime, including the Royal Geographic Society’s Founder’s Gold Medal. Also, the question of whether Rae or Robert McClure found the last link of the Northwest Passage is still under debate. Nevertheless, John Rae was unquestionably one of the greatest Arctic explorers and a fitting subject for the affection of McGoogan’s readers.

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solange@solangedesantis.com