

John Rae to be honoured in Westminster Abbey—but not for discovering the northwest passage

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ABSTRACT. Since at least 2001 Ken McGoogan has been claiming that in discovering Rae Strait in 1854 John Rae also discovered the final link in the northwest passage. This claim is false, in that a substantial section of the passage further north, some 240 km in length (between Bellot Strait and where James Clark Ross had found the north magnetic pole) was still undiscovered in 1854. On the basis of McGoogan's false claim Mr. Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney and Shetland, has been pursuing a campaign to have a corrective plaque installed near the Franklin cenotaph in Westminster Abbey to the effect that Rae, and not Franklin, discovered the northwest passage. The Dean of Westminster and the Abbey authorities have decided that a simple tablet with the words 'John Rae; arctic explorer' but with no further elaboration, will be installed in the Abbey near the Franklin cenotaph.

McGoogan on Rae

In his book *Fatal passage. The untold story of John Rae, the arctic adventurer who discovered the fate of Franklin* Ken McGoogan states (McGoogan 2001: 190) that in discovering Rae Strait between King William Island and Boothia Peninsula in the spring of 1854 John Rae of the Hudson's Bay Company had thereby discovered 'the final link in the Northwest Passage.' McGoogan has repeated this claim in numerous lectures ever since, and has even erected an aluminium plaque making this claim (in an inscription of 250 words) on the shores of Rae Strait (McGoogan 2001: 303–312).

Unfortunately this claim is totally erroneous. In 1854 a substantial section of that variant of the northwest passage further north, namely Franklin Strait and Larsen Sound (from where James Clark Ross found the magnetic pole north to Bellot Strait) for a total of some 240 km, was still undiscovered. Maps showing the unexplored section of the passage may be found in McGoogan (2001: 256) and in Williams (2009: 175). Rae himself was well aware that this section of the passage was still unexplored in 1854. In a review of Captain Albert Markham's book *Sir John Franklin's life* in the *Journal of the American Geographical Society* Rae (1891: 341) wrote: 'Thus nearly 800 miles of the 1000 left unexplored in 1839 [that is following Dease and Simpson's explorations], were completed by me, but there still remained about 200 miles, between Bellot Strait and the Magnetic Pole on the west shore of Boothia, a blank on the charts, and these were explored by McClintock in his memorable journey [in 1859]...' Although Rae has somewhat exaggerated the length of the unexplored section, this is irrefutable evidence of the fact that he was well aware that his discovery of Rae Strait did not represent the 'final link' in the northwest passage. Rae's reputation as perhaps the greatest (and certainly most efficient) arctic explorer is already sufficiently secure without this unnecessary and erroneous attempt at inflating it.

Political involvement

For at least a decade Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney and Shetland, undoubtedly influenced by McGoogan's false statement, has been waging a campaign to have a corrective plaque mounted near Franklin's cenotaph in Westminster Abbey to the effect that Rae and not Franklin had discovered the passage. In July 2004 he tabled a motion in the House of Commons to the effect that the House 'regrets that Dr. Rae was never awarded the public recognition that was his due'. More recently (Carmichael 2009) he tabled another more specific motion, to the effect that 'John Rae was the first to discover the final link to the passage' ... and that the House 'regrets that memorials to Sir John Franklin outside the Admiralty headquarters and inside Westminster Abbey still inaccurately describe Franklin as the first to discover the [North West] passage, and calls on the Ministry of Defence and the Abbey authorities to take the necessary steps to clarify the true position. .

At the conference to celebrate John Rae's 200th birthday in Stromness in the Orkneys in September 2013, Carmichael made a statement to the effect that he had recently been in touch with the Dean of Westminster Abbey and that the latter was supportive of the idea of a corrective plaque being installed adjacent to the Franklin cenotaph. Carmichael repeated this statement in a column he wrote in the *Orcadian*, a local Orkney newspaper (*Orcadian* (Kirkwall) 3 October 2013). McGoogan was also present at the conference and once again repeated his erroneous statement in a public lecture. I spoke to each of them, pointing out their error, and later e-mailed them both, quoting chapter and verse, but received no reply from either.

Ecclesiastical contacts

I subsequently tried to e-mail the Dean of Westminster, the Very Reverend Dr. John Hall, drawing his attention to the fact that the McGoogan/Carmichael claim was false. Unfortunately I had only the general e-mail address for the Abbey, and the Dean did not receive my e-mail. Thereafter I drew the situation to the attention of my friend, Professor Glyn Williams, who in turn passed on the information to Ann Savours; they have both published excellent histories of the exploration of the northwest passage (Williams 2009; Savours 1999), and both fully agree with me that McGoogan is in error. Ann Savours obtained the Dean's phone number, and after establishing her *bona fides* with his secretary and explaining the situation sent the Dean a letter with a copy of my e-mail attached.

The outcome was that she received a telephone message from the Dean on 24 April 2014 to the effect that John Rae will be commemorated by a ledger stone (a tablet set in the floor) near the Franklin cenotaph stating simply 'John Rae. Arctic explorer' but not going into any further detail. This is a felicitous outcome. Rae will be honoured and there will be no false attempts at enhancing his already admirable reputation. We are indebted to McGoogan and Carmichael for initiating the sequence of events which have led to this outcome, and the Dean of Westminster and the Abbey authorities are to be commended for refusing officially to sanction, in very concrete form, the erroneous claim that Rae was the discoverer of the northwest passage. I understand that the unveiling of the tablet (to be paid for by the John Rae Society) is scheduled to take

place on 30 September 2014, the 201st anniversary of Rae's birth.

Unfortunately, the plaque on the base of the new statue of John Rae, unveiled at Stromness last September, does include the false statement that he discovered the northwest passage. It is truly unfortunate that those responsible for the wording of the inscription uncritically accepted McGoogan's erroneous claim.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Professor Glyn Williams and Dr. Ann Savours, especially the latter for her vital role in making contact with the Dean of Westminster. I am also grateful the three anonymous reviewers who all recommend publication of this note. While I did not feel it appropriate to include many of the suggestions from two of them, in what is essentially a news note, I will be

covering many of them in a later paper, and am grateful for their input.

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Defenders of Arctic orthodoxy turn their backs on Sir John Franklin

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ABSTRACT. William Barr's article on John Rae presents quite the spectacle (Barr 2014). Barr paints a picture of eminent British historians, staunch defenders of Arctic orthodoxy, scurrying around to deny Rae his rightful recognition and stumbling into an abyss of self-contradiction. In their anxiety to keep Rae in his 'proper place' at Westminster Abbey, Barr and his friends have repudiated Sir John Franklin's claim to being the discoverer of the northwest passage – the claim they sallied forth to defend.

Before going further, I must confess to being shocked by Barr's thinly veiled contempt for MP Alistair Carmichael and his fellow Orcadians. Apparently, these simple folk are unable to think for themselves. Some postcolonial Pied Piper, that would be me, must have lured them down the garden path to ideological impurity.

Sorry, no. Flashback to 1998. While doing research at the Scott Polar Research Institute, I gleaned that Franklin was being credited with Rae's crowning achievement. I travelled north to Kirkwall and was delighted to learn that Orcadian historians had independently reached the same conclusion, and were asserting that Rae had discovered the final link in the northwest passage. Alas, nobody could hear them.

Barr quotes Rae on the subject of an uncharted stretch of coastline and claims that this bolsters his case. In fact, Rae was writing not about a channel or a waterway, but about land. Nobody has ever suggested that Rae completed the mapping of the Arctic coast of North America. Barr's convoluted argument is specious; a red herring.

For the record, I demolished his allegations last September at the Stromness Academy, when I gave a talk on *Returning to Rae Strait*. See the attached detail from a map printed in July 1857, before any explorer but Rae had come anywhere near Rae



Fig. 1. Detail from a map of North America by John Arrowsmith. London: House of Commons, Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Company. Ordered to be Printed 31 July 1857.

Strait (Fig. 1). Barr refers to a 240 km stretch of coastline along Boothia Peninsula, which is indicated with dots. That stretch of land was not yet charted in detail, which is what Rae was indicating.

Yet explorers, notably Kennedy and Bellot, had previously determined that the channel opposite that stretch was at least 30 km wide and free of islands. This explains why the 1857 map is so accurate. Now, a stretch of coastline cannot, by definition, provide a navigable link. A channel or a strait is required to link waterways. And I must insist, as I have done since 1998, that John Rae discovered the final link in the northwest passage.

More than that, I applaud the two-word clarification that Orcadians presented with the new statue of Rae in Stromness: the final link in the *first navigable* northwest passage. That clarification brings us to Roald Amundsen, universally recognised as the first explorer to navigate the passage.

In his book *The North West Passage*, Amundsen explicitly credits Rae with having shown him where to sail. 'His work was of incalculable value to the *Gjoa* expedition,' Amundsen writes. 'He discovered Rae Strait which separates King William