

Surgeon, Explorer and Surveyor - Dr John Rae Celebration



As part of the institution's 150th-anniversary celebrations, the RICS hosted an event to award Dr John Rae posthumously as an honorary Chartered Surveyor, in London on 13 September. The award was presented to Andrew Appleby, president of the John Rae Society by John Hughes, President of the RICS. Both gave speeches outlining Rae's achievements and the aims of the John Rae Society, which has very nearly bought Rae's home in Orkney and has plans to turn it into a world-renowned centre for Arctic studies.

Rae the Doctor

Dr Rae studied as a surgeon at Edinburgh University. He returned to his native Orkney on graduation at the age of 19, wondering, like many before and after, what to do next. His father was the Orkney agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, which controlled large parts of Canada and suggested he sign on as ship's doctor for a round trip to Northern Canada. So, in 1833 he headed west, but his ship was iced-in over winter. He then accepted the post of surgeon and clerk at Moose Factory, which he held for ten years. In his free time, he learnt, from the First Nation and Metis people, the skills he would need to survive in the Arctic. There was a mutual respect and Rae is remembered in the lore of the indigenous community, almost two centuries later.

Rae the Surveyor

He came to the attention of Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, having walked 100 miles in snow shoes to treat a patient. Simpson wanted someone to explore the North West Passage and complete the mapping of Canada's coastline. This involved training Rae as a surveyor and a further 1,200 miles of snow walking to reach Toronto to receive his tuition.

Rae the Explorer

Rae's secret to success was his respect for the indigenous people, who he realised knew much more than him and taught him the skills that would keep him alive in the Arctic. He made four expeditions during which he mapped the northern coast of Canada and proved the existence of the North West Passage. He also found evidence of the earlier ill-fated expedition led by Franklin and discovered that the explorers had resorted to dragging their ship across the ice and eventually to cannibalism before they had all perished. He reported this to the Admiralty who then unwisely published the information unedited. The descendants of the crew were understandably horrified and Rae was unjustly blamed and vilified by the establishment. Although he was honoured in Orkney, his historical role was airbrushed out of history and it is only recently that his contribution has been recognised.

Rae the Orcadian

There were further speeches from John Muir of the Orkney Museum, Harvey Johnston from Orkney Islands Council and a message from Michael Palin, patron of the John Rae Society.

Johnston observed that Orkney is an island oasis only reached after passing through "barren wasteland" on the way. It was, he said, the centre of ancient Britain. The island has produced and still produces many hardy folk, and clearly the first surveyor – who must surely have surveyed the Ring of Brogdar, leading the way for "other lesser known stone circles" further south. His entertaining speech concluded with a poem for the occasion and, because Rae was also an accomplished violinist, the audience were played out with a recording from local violinists The Wrigley Sisters.

We were Orcadians for the evening: it was an insight and a pleasure. For more about the John Rae Society, visit www.johnraesociety.com.

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