

10 April 2013

The Very Reverend Dr John R. Hall
Dean of Westminster
The Chapter Office
Westminster Abbey
20 Deans Yard
London SW1P 3PA
United Kingdom

Dear Dean Hall,

I write to you at the request of Mr. Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney, in regard to his wish to have a plaque memorializing the life and accomplishments of Dr John Rae placed in the Abbey. It is a wish that very many of us here on the other side of the Atlantic, both scholars and avid followers of the history of the exploration of the Arctic, share and endorse very warmly.

Interest in this fertile period of history has grown enormously in the past few decades in the United States and Canada, and Dr Rae's career has been at the very center of this renewed historical research and writing. In 1993, McGill-Queen's University Press published *No Ordinary Journey: John Rae, Arctic Explorer, 1813-1893*, the first modern treatment of his life and career, which renewed interest in his accomplishments; another signal moment came in 2001 with the publication of Canadian author Ken McGoogan's *Fatal Passage: The Untold Story of John Rae, the Arctic Adventurer who Discovered the Fate of Franklin*. This book was later adapted into an award-winning documentary by John Walker, *Passage* (2008), which dramatized Rae's career; that same year, the BBC broadcast an episode of *Ray Mears' Northern Wilderness* devoted to Rae. Most recently, Mr. McGoogan has brought forth a new edition of Rae's *Arctic Journals* (2012).

Thanks in part to these many historical and documentary works, the outline of Rae's character and achievements has come into much clearer focus. He was one of the farthest-travelled and most successful Arctic sledgers of all time, on three occasions managing more than 900 miles without assistance; in a landscape where many white men starved, Rae hunted with such skill that he elicited the admiration of the Inuit, with whom he often shared his extra food. At a time when dozens of ships from both the Royal Navy, the United States Navy, and private parties were scouring the north for evidence of the fate of Sir John Franklin, he alone, thanks to his friendship with the Inuit, learned the particulars of their demise and brought back personal relics, among them Sir John's medal of knighthood, as evidence. He was granted the £1,000 reward for ascertaining Franklin's fate (an award of which, by his own account, he had not been aware), but suffered sharp criticism in the press for passing along Inuit testimony that cannibalism had broken out among some groups of Franklin survivors. Many in those days, among them Charles Dickens, simply could not conceive of such a thing; for them, the Inuit were little more than savages, but recent excavations and examinations of human remains have established that

cannibalism did in fact occur, vindicating both Dr Rae and the Inuit in whose testimony he had placed such faith. It was entirely due to his discoveries that Sir Francis Leopold McClintock was able to locate the final record and traces of Franklin's men five years later.

Dr Rae handled the adverse publicity concerning his news with considerable graciousness, and although he pleaded his case as eloquently as he was able, including a lengthy exchange in the press with Dickens, he never became vindictive or bitter. Lost in the debate was the fact that, while he was busy surveying the area near where Franklin's men met their deaths, he in fact discovered the "Rae Strait" which forms part of a route through the fabled Northwest Passage, which Franklin and so many others gave their lives in seeking; aptly was it dubbed "The Arctic Grail" by the late Canadian historian Pierre Berton. Rae was, in the words of novelist Joseph Conrad, truly one of the "knights-errant" of this frozen wilderness.

It's my feeling, one shared by a great many of my academic colleagues with whom I meet regularly at conferences and panels, that it would be highly appropriate for Dr. Rae to be memorialized at Westminster Abbey. Enough time has passed, and enough lessons have been learned about the true nature of his character and accomplishments, that it seems to me fitting that he be remembered in the same place where Franklin is quite touchingly memorialized, and Charles Dickens, with whom he once dared to disagree, is interred. He is, in this sense, both an historical figure of considerable note, and one whose life's work is testimony to the understanding, trust, and co-operation he had with the Inuit people of Canada, and which they still remember to this day. One of his names among them was "Aglooka" – he who takes long strides – and indeed he did.

Very sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Russell A. Potter". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.

Russell A. Potter, Ph.D.
Professor of English (specialty in Arctic history and literature)
Rhode Island College
Providence, RI 02909
USA