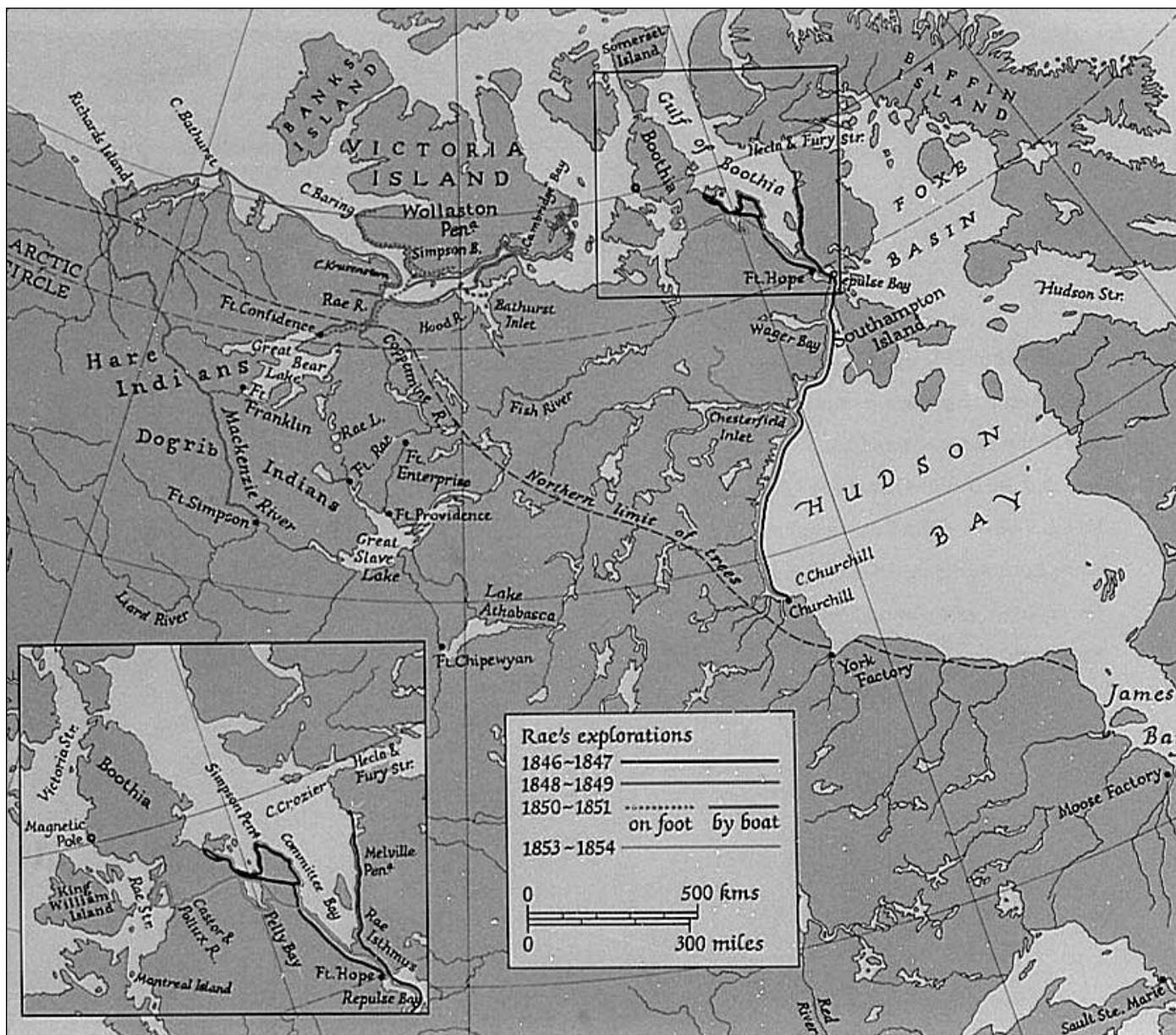


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**JOHN RAE, MD**  
**1813-1893**



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*Rae's Franklin search expeditions in northern Canada*  
*To the Gulf of Boothia (see insert), 1846-1847*  
*To the Mackenzie and Coppermine Rivers, 1848-1849*  
*To Southern Victoria Island, 1850-1851*  
*Across the Boothia Peninsula to Rae Strait, 1853-1854*

## JOHN RAE, MD 1813-1893

*“There is no longer serious doubt that in Rae we have if not the most important, at least the most challenging figure in the history of the 19th century arctic exploration”.*  
- Stefansson, 1954.

### Introduction

Early Western Canadian history includes some illustrious but not well known explorers, like Henry Kelsey, Anthony Henday, and until recently, David Thompson. Kelsey remained obscure because his diaries were buried in a castle, following a controversy in Northern Ireland over two hundred years ago. They were not discovered until 1926. Dr. Rae's three volume personal diaries were recently uncovered at the Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge, England.<sup>(1)</sup> His first biography was completed in 1985.<sup>(2)</sup>

Dr. Rae's major achievements were not as a physician or fur trader rather as a geographer completing the mapping of the northern Canadian coastline and the northwest passageway.<sup>(3)</sup>

Rae's fame resulted from the four northern Canadian searches he undertook from 1846-1854 to confirm the demise of the Sir John Franklin Expedition. On his second search for Franklin in 1848/1849, Drs. John Rae and John Richardson passed through what is now Northern Alberta on their way to descend the Mackenzie River. The second search found no trace of Franklin or his ships between the Mackenzie and Coppermine Rivers. Rae returned to northeastern Alberta in late 1849 before returning to Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie near Great Slave Lake. While awaiting further instructions for a third search for Franklin, the Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC), through Governor Simpson appointed Rae Chief Factor for the Mackenzie District.

In the spring of 1850, the British Navy and the HBC agreed to send Rae for a third search of the northern coastline east of the Coppermine River. Although he was materially assisted by two locally made small boats and an inflatable rubber dinghy to cross the river estuaries, the Rae expedition was again unsuccessful.

Rae's fourth search in 1853/1854, which started at the northwest end of Hudson Bay, was successful in finding Franklin relics and the disastrous outcome of the expedition.

### From Youth to MD 1813-1833

John Rae was born in the Hall of Clestrain near Stromness, on the Orkney Islands, off the Scottish coast on September 30, 1813. By age fifteen he had taught himself survival skills including hunting and shooting, canoeing, boating, climbing, and walking. More importantly, Rae had acquired an unusual tolerance of the elements. John Rae entered medicine at the University of Edinburgh at age sixteen. He graduated as Dr. John Rae in 1833, just shy of his twentieth birthday.

### The Years With the HBC 1833-1844

Seeking adventure, Dr. Rae sailed to York Factory as the HBC surgeon on the Barque, Prince of Wales. The ship arrived in Hudson Strait in 1833, but was forced to spend the winter in the Bay because the passageway to York Factory was ice bound. Rae and the crew wintered on the southern shores of Hudson's Bay near Moose Factory. One-half the men

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1. Rae, John      The autobiography of Dr. John Rae. Three Volumes. Reference 787/1. Deposited in the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, England. Copies of the first two volumes are held in the Arctic Institute of North America, at the University of Calgary.
  2. Richards, Robert L.      *Dr. John Rae*, 231 pages, Caedmon of Whitby Press, 1985.
  3. Rich, E.E.      *Rae's Arctic Correspondence, 1844-1855*, 401 pages, Volume 16, Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1953. Other excellent Rae references include: 1) Ross Mitchell's "Dr. John Rae, Arctic Explorer and his Search for Franklin", *CMAJ*, 25: 85-90, January 1933. 2) J.S. Clouston's "Orkney and the HBC", *Beaver*, Outfit 268: 37-39, September 1937; 3) David B. Stewart's "In the Wake of Erebus and Terror", *Beaver* 68(5): 13-18, October/November 1988; the 4) Rae Centenary Issue. *Beaver* Outfit 284: 25-41, March 1954, which included 5 articles on Dr. Rae, 5) H.N. Wallace's *The Navy, The Company and Richard King or British Exploration in the Canadian Arctic 1829-1860*, 232 pages, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980; 6) I. Banyan's *No Ordinary Journey – John Rae, Arctic Explorer. 1813-1893*, 116 pages, McGill-Queen's Press, 1993; 7) C. Stuart Houston's "Dr. John Rae, The Most Efficient Arctic Explorer", *Annals of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons*, 20(3): 225-228, May 1987; and 8) Ken McGoogan's *Fatal Passage: The Untold Story of John Rae*, 328 pages, Harper Flamingo, 2001.

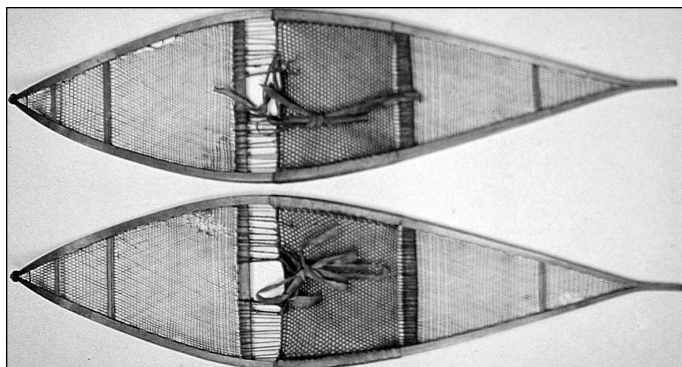
developed scurvy, which Rae treated with a cranberries and wild pea sprout soup. The next year the ship reached York Factory, then known as the best place east of the Rocky Mountains. Rae signed a five year, that became an eleven year, contract. His postings were at various Forts on the shores of James Bay. He worked both as a Factor and as a physician. Two hundred mile house calls were not unknown.

Dr. Rae came to the notice of HBC Governor George Simpson rather forcefully, during one of Simpson's famous rapid rounds of the HBC Forts. Dr. Rae's voyageur team challenged Governor Simpson's vaunted voyageurs to a six mile canoe race around a nearby island. The Rae team won.

**The Franklin Search years 1844-1854**

In 1844, with over a decade of apprenticeship experience behind him, Dr. Rae declined a local promotion, and instead accepted Governor Simpson's offer to survey the remaining uncharted northern Arctic coast.

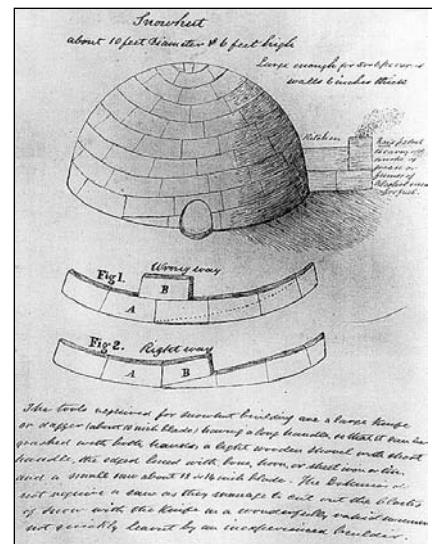
One year later on May 19, 1845, the Franklin Expedition set sail from England to cross North America by boat, through the northwest passageway. The Expedition was last seen near northern Baffin Bay on July 17, 1845. It became ice bound for the next three years. Suffering from scurvy and malnutrition, the remaining Franklin survivors attempted to walk south to the Back River in the summer of 1848. All perished in the process.



Snowshoes used by John Rae 1-3

In his first Franklin search in 1846/1847, Rae was sent north of Hudson's Bay and mapped six hundred miles of the eastern coastline along the northwest passageway, on both sides of the Boothia Peninsula. He located and mapped its southern sides, but did not find the passageway that crossed it, now named Rae Strait. Dr. Rae unknowingly came within one hundred and fifty miles of the two Franklin ships frozen in ice. Had he met any Inuit who knew of their location, he might have saved the expedition.

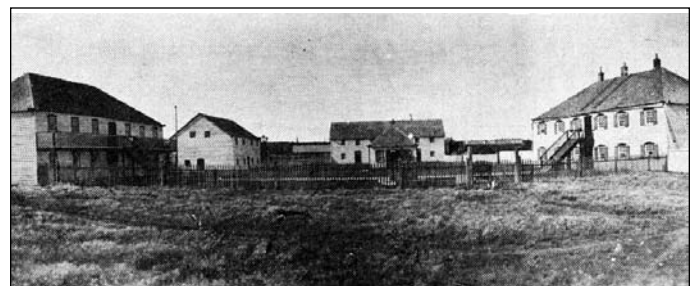
After publishing a summary of the first search, Dr. Rae was immediately acknowledged as the leader of the self-sufficient method of northern Canadian travel, or going by land and going light. He had taken few provisions, traveled for two seasons, and returned healthy and fit. During the search, Rae learned the rudiments of the Inuit dialect, so he could communicate with the Inuit. They taught him how to make an igloo in an hour, repair snowshoes, predict animal migration patterns for food, forecast weather patterns, and analyze snow conditions. As an accomplished marksman, Rae provisioned his own expeditions. Even so, he could still average twenty to thirty miles per day.



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Rae's Snowhut Construction Drawing

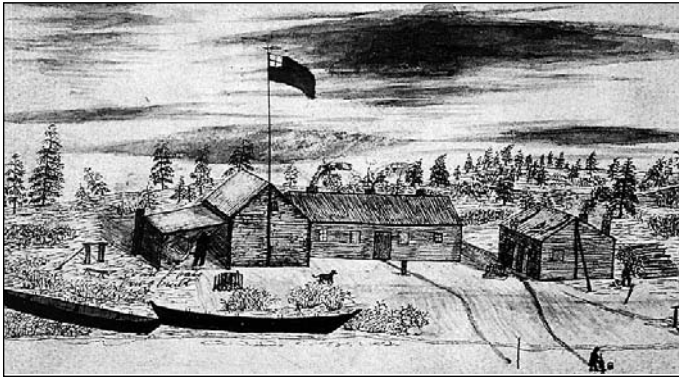
Not hearing any word from the expedition, the Admiralty became alarmed. The Franklin expedition was now two years overdue. In 1848 they sent Dr. Rae with Dr. John Richardson, on Rae's second Franklin search. This time he crossed the northern prairies to Fort Chipewyan and descended the Mackenzie River, then travelled eastward along the northern Canadian coast to the Coppermine River estuary. Early winter icing along the coast and rivers shortened the search.



Fort Simpson, circa 1848-1850

1-5

Arriving at Fort Simpson in 1849, Dr. Rae was appointed the HBC Chief Factor of the Mackenzie District. The next year (1850) Rae was ordered north for a third time. He started at the eastern end of his second search – the Coppermine River – and followed the northern coastline eastward, crossing river estuaries using a newly invented cloth and rubber dinghy. Rae found two fragments of wood from the Franklin ships but no trace of the Franklin men. For his effort Dr. Rae received the Royal Geographical Society's Gold Medal and an Honorary MD from McGill.



*Ft Confidence on Great Bear Lake near the Coppermine River. Rae wintered here in 1850/51* 1-6

A desperate Britain sent him north a fourth time in 1853. Rae started from York Factory on Hudson Bay and retraced the steps of his first search. This time he met Inuit on the Boothia Peninsula, who described the final attempt of the last forty seamen to walk south to the mainland and safety. The desperate seamen had reached the estuary of the Back River but no further.

Rae traded goods for Inuit stories and Franklin relics, which he brought back to England. When Rae suspected cannibalism, his findings were discounted by a skeptical Admiralty and public. Rae eventually received the 10,000 pound reward for determining the fate of the Franklin Expedition, the ships Erebus and Terror, and the 134 missing men. He shared it with his northern compatriots.

**After Franklin 1857-1893**

Following Rae's 1857 interview with the British Parliament's Select Committee investigating the charter obligations of the HBC, he joined his brother in medical practice in Hamilton from 1857-1860. On one occasion Rae walked forty miles to Toronto in one day, stayed for dinner, and returned to Hamilton. When a request came to tour the American interior with HBC majority shareholder Edward Ellice in 1857/58, he accepted forthwith. In the winter of

1857/58, Captain John Palliser consulted him in Hamilton. A year later Rae met Lt. Thomas Blakiston, who was exiting the Palliser expedition. In 1859 he met artist Paul Kane and Gov. George Simpson in Toronto, before joining the Earl of Southesk, whose trip onto the prairies he helped organize. In 1860 he married Jane Alicia (Kate) Thompson of Hamilton. The two returned to England.



*Katherine Rae, 1839-1919. The Raes' married in 1860.* 1-7

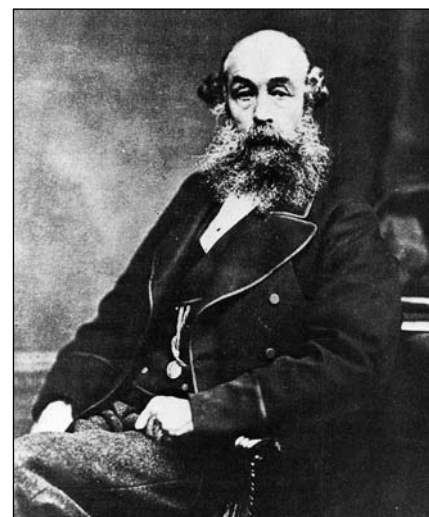
Dr. Rae revisited Western Canada as a guide in 1861 and returned to site a future telegraph line through the Yellowhead Pass in 1864. In 1882, he made his last visit to Western Canada and spoke of his northern journeys to the Manitoba Historical Society.

In his years in North America, Rae traveled over 23,000 miles. He mapped 1600 miles of northern coastline. In retirement, Dr. Rae wrote thirty scientific articles and books on his experiences ranging from how to survive in the north to the aurora borealis.

Dr. John Rae died at age eighty in London, England. Neither the Crown nor the Admiralty recognized his Canadian accomplishments or recommended him for a knighthood. He was buried in St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney, in a marble coffin with a blanket thrown over him and a rifle by his side.

**The 1937 AMA Gavel**

In 1937 the AMA sought the oldest medically related wood they could find in Alberta, to make a ceremonial gavel. The gavel was to be the "insignia of office"

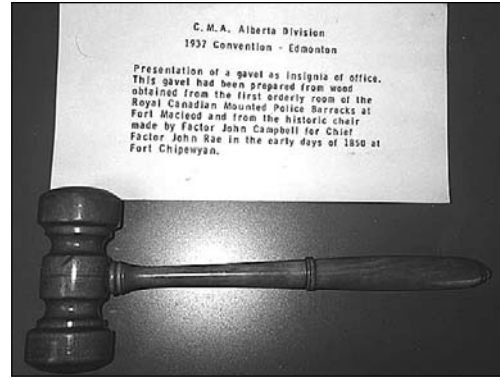


*Chief Factor Robert Campbell* 1-8

of the new Canadian Medical Association Alberta Division. The idea was likely that of Drs. J.S. McEachern and G.R. Johnson. They had participated in a similar ceremony at the joint American/Canadian Medical Association meeting in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1935. The AMA found a chair made by HBC Trader Robert Campbell, which he presented to Dr. Rae at Fort Chipewyan in early 1850. Part of one leg became the handle of the 1937 gavel. The mallet was fashioned from wood used to construct the NWMP Orderly Officer's room in Fort Macleod in 1874. That room would have been used by Officers on duty, including NWMP surgeons Drs. R.B. Nevitt and G.A. Kennedy.<sup>(4)</sup>

The 1937 gavel was presented by UofA President W.A.R. Kerr, to incoming AMA President Dr. J.K. Mulloy on September 8, 1937. It confirmed the completion of the three year amalgamation of the AMA/CPSA with the CMA. In so doing the AMA became the first provincial medical association to federate with the CMA. In the process, the AMA became the CMA Alberta Division.<sup>(5)</sup>

All provincial medical associations followed suit and became divisions of the CMA by the end of 1938.



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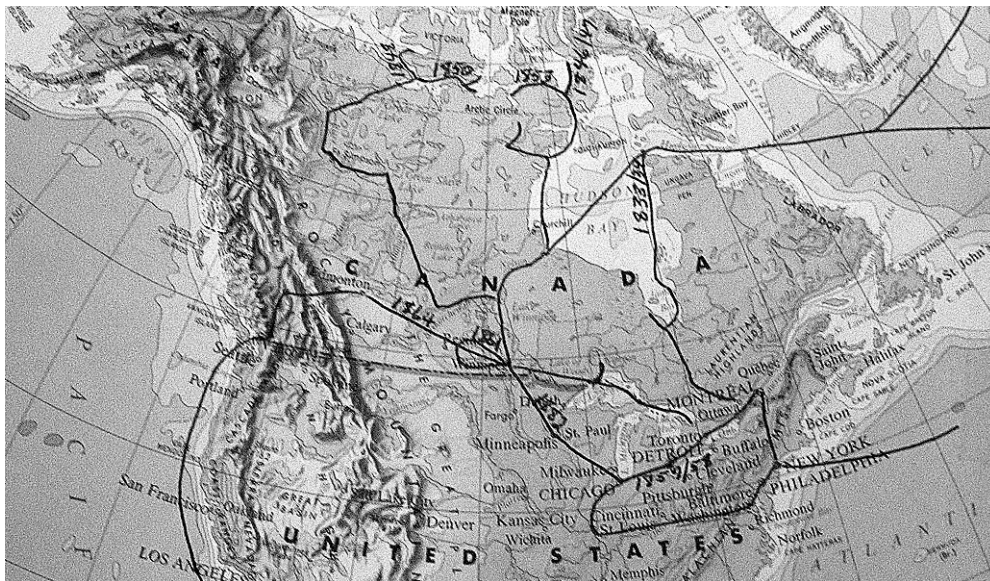
The AMA's 1937 Gavel made from Dr. John Rae's 1850 chair and the 1874 NWMP Fort Macleod Orderly room.

The federated CMA became the representative of organized medicine in Canada for the first time since its incorporation in 1867, and just in time to face national issues involving WWII physician recruitment and State Health Insurance.

**Related Profile:** Hector

**Related Perspective:** 1937 AMA Gavel

**Key Words:** Northern Canadian explorer and geographer, Fort Chipewyan, Searches for the Franklin Expedition 1846-1854, 1937 AMA gavel



Selected travels by John Rae in North America

1-10

1833/34 from Scotland to James Bay, 1846/47 1st Franklin searching expedition, 1848/49 2nd Franklin, 1850/51 3rd Franklin, 1853/54 4th Franklin, 1857/58 United States Hunting Trip with Edward Ellice, 1861 Guiding and hunting trip in Western Canada, 1864 Siting of a telegraph line across Western Canada, 1882 to Winnipeg via Minnesota

4. Lampard, Robert The History of the Alberta Medical Association's 1937 Gavel. 14 page manuscript June 2004 in the possession of the author.

5. Lampard, Robert AMA's 1937 gavel commemorated new era in Canadian medical history, in the Alberta Doctors Digest 30(4): 4-5, July/August 2005. Reprinted in Part 2. The 1937 gavel was remounted and presented to Dr. W.M. Mulloy, the son of the original recipient Dr. J.K. Mulloy, at the Foothills Hospital annual medical staff banquet, April 29, 2005. It was framed and re-presented by the author to the AMA Board, April 7, 2006.

**JOHN RAE, MD**  
**1813-1893**  
**A Poetic Tribute**

*Originally presented in Jasper at the AMA Annual Meeting as one of the Hutton Lectures, September 1992*

*It is my pleasure to introduce you to John Rae, M.D.  
 The northern explorer who lived off the land  
 Searching for Franklin four times with his band.*

*Then buried for a century 'till his dairies were found  
 With the help of two doctors Rich and Richards by name  
 Who exhumed his story, and added some glory  
 About the fleet footed Rae, who in Jasper once stayed.*

*To understand Rae, one must first delay  
 And focus on the context, of his time and day.  
 The British had sought, since Frobisher's first shot  
 To find a shortcut to the treasures of Cathay.*

*Many that followed, like Hudson's in his Bay  
 Perished with the thought of the reward they had not  
 For finding the NW Passage, was worth a whole lot.*

*From the east came Munk, Davis and Baffin,  
 From the west came Bering and Franklin surveying,  
 Hearne headed west, found the Coppermine instead,  
 And Cook chartered the NW, on his third excursion.*

*So London based Dalrymple with typical coercion  
 Linked the new maps with a river or two  
 And waited for Mackenzie to discover the connection.  
 Up Peace down Coola, 'till salt water at last  
 Missing Captain Vancouver (1793) by a few nights past.*

*Crossing Canada by land, wetted the muzzle  
 Of the British lion, to fill holes in the puzzle  
 They elevated the Passage to a national tussle.  
 Spending two million pounds on ships and good muscle  
 The Admiralty sent, its finest kin  
 In the form of two ships and Sir John Franklin.*

*First down the Mackenzie, in 1821 he went  
 To Prudhoe Bay and Coppermine his crews he sent.*

*Returning again in 1825 for a two year stint,  
 Launching Doc Richardson's scientific career  
 Depositing Thomas Drummond, stewed in the snow  
 Right here in Jasper at 40 below  
 Collecting seeds for James Hooker at Kew to grow.*

*Then came Government pressure on the Hudson Bay Co.  
 To finish the Northwest link by land or by floe.*

*Thomas Simpson, George's cousin, came within a blow  
 Of doing the job with Dease and Eskimo  
 By proving that white men could go through the north  
 Following the natives for miles on course.*

*Now only 300 miles were left to know  
 Was it land or water and where did it flow  
 Past the top of Canada at lat. 60 or so.*

*Sir John was recalled in 1845  
 As Governor of Tasmania, 20 years he'd survived  
 To be outfitted to make it not dead but alive.  
 Food canned by lead scalpers, his course was contrived.*

**Rae and the Hudson's Bay Co.**

*This brings us to Rae for his heyday had started  
 With an Orkney background, and medical ticket  
 Before presenting himself at the Hudson Bay wicket.*

*In time to treat typhoid in Hudson/James Bay  
 Couldn't sail back to England so he wintered and stayed*

*Discovering that cranberries for scurvy would do  
 He was so successful, that he lost only two  
 And loved it so much he signed on for a few.*

*His talents observed gave Simpson his first clue  
 While at Moose Factory doctoring the natives too  
 As he taught himself sledding,  
 Snow shoeing and night travelling  
 Adding to his competence in hunting and canoeing.  
 Never fatigued, 74 miles he strode  
 In one day to Fort Albany with his scalpel and a load.  
 Returning to best Simpsons fur crew 'tis true  
 Over six miles of water in 1842.*

*On a winter sabbatical to Hamilton he shoed.  
 Returning post haste without loss of a step  
 So starved and malnourished the padre he wept.*

*At the request of the Governor,  
 He prepared for the Arctic  
 So off to Red River, then Nipigon and Toronto  
 To learn about stars from Lefroy quite pronto.*

*Surveying at night as he retraced his way  
 To York Factory to await his departure day.*

Finally by packet came the Committee's approval  
 With 12 men, two boats and a Halkett inflatable.  
 Off to the north which he reached in short order  
 And built his stone mansion, boulder by boulder  
 Fort Hope it was named, never to disappear  
 With double glass panes, for light to peer  
 Just enough in the evening to read some Shakespeare.

In the winter of '47 to fill his long nights  
 He practiced snow carving as soon as it was light  
 Covered 600 miles in a month of very fast flight  
 Never neglecting to procure any botanical delight.

Unfortunately missing the Franklin icepack  
 Because the Eskimos he met had not crossed their track  
 Only 150 miles across the Boothia and back.

Sprinting to England he discovered to his horror  
 No trace of Franklins ships the Erebus and Terror  
 Now three years in the Arctic and destined to remain.

In the race against time he returned yet again  
 Sailing to New York, then Fort William, Red River  
 To Slave Lake and Mackenzie and the Coppermine  
 Only to be turned back by the ice twice this time.

At Great Bear he wintered in the house he thought nice.  
 Promoted Chief Factor it was not paradise.  
 Stuck at Fort Simpson 'till the Winter of '50/51  
 When orders for a third trip finally came in.  
 Covering 824 miles in 42 days  
 Turned back by foul weather, cut feet and no trace.  
 Except for two pieces on the shore where they lay  
 That came from the ships  
 In the icy cold grip only 40 miles away.

Returning to London with few findings he strove  
 Covering a thousand miles in a month on the move  
 The Royal Society was so impressed  
 Gave him their Gold medal as an acknowledgement too

But when orders came through from the Committee anew  
 For a fourth trip to the Arctic and the land he first knew.  
 With no time to waste  
 He skipped Montreal in haste  
 Not stopping to receive his honorary cape.

From York Factory he tried to short circuit the trip  
 Through Chesterfield Inlet he found  
 Too many mountains to outstrip  
 So he wintered at Fort Hope and next Spring set out  
 To the Boothia Base and met on the way  
 The first Eskimos with the news of the Franklin plight  
 About 40 starving whites, a boat, and sad sights.

Spending three months trading for news and/or clues  
 Before returning to London to abort sending future crews  
 Instead he found criticism for not personally seeing  
 The cannibalism and burial sites and instead believing  
 The Eskimos who told him of the gruesome facts.

So he waited 18 months for Anderson's attack  
 To King's Cache on the north of the River Back  
 Before the Government would release  
 The 10,000 held back

### **The Unsettled Years**

For the next twelve years were full of unrest  
 He'd left the company having covered his retirement nest  
 Interviewed in '57 by the Committee Select  
 On the Hudson Bay's Territory, the plans he thought best.

Returning to Hamilton he advised Palliser and patients  
 Walked 40 miles to Toronto to be dined as a guest.

Then chucking it all he followed Ellice by rail  
 To St. Paul, Mississippi, and numerous feasts  
 With Southesk on the prairies, on horse after beast.  
 Then marrying Kate Thompson a companion at least  
 Before back to England, on a honeymoon thrill  
 Returning to Saskatchewan for one last sport kill.

A '64 trip to line a telegraph cable  
 He traced its location as far as he was able  
 From Red River to Edmonton, Athabasca, then Jasper,  
 The Fraser, Alexandra to Royal New Westminster.

### **Retirement:**

Returning for the last time by rail in 1882  
 To Winnipeg to speak about a land with too few.

Contributing when asked on the Canada he knew  
 To the dozens of associations to which he belonged.  
 With clear recollections he knew to be right  
 About weather and Eskimos and the Arctic night.

Leaving his name on locations not few  
 Like a strait and a river and a town to view.

From the crypts of Kirkwall he surveys the dew  
 Never knighted or honoured too clever they knew  
 For a Scot with the Company, the Navy couldn't do  
 Acknowledge they were bested by a man and a crew.