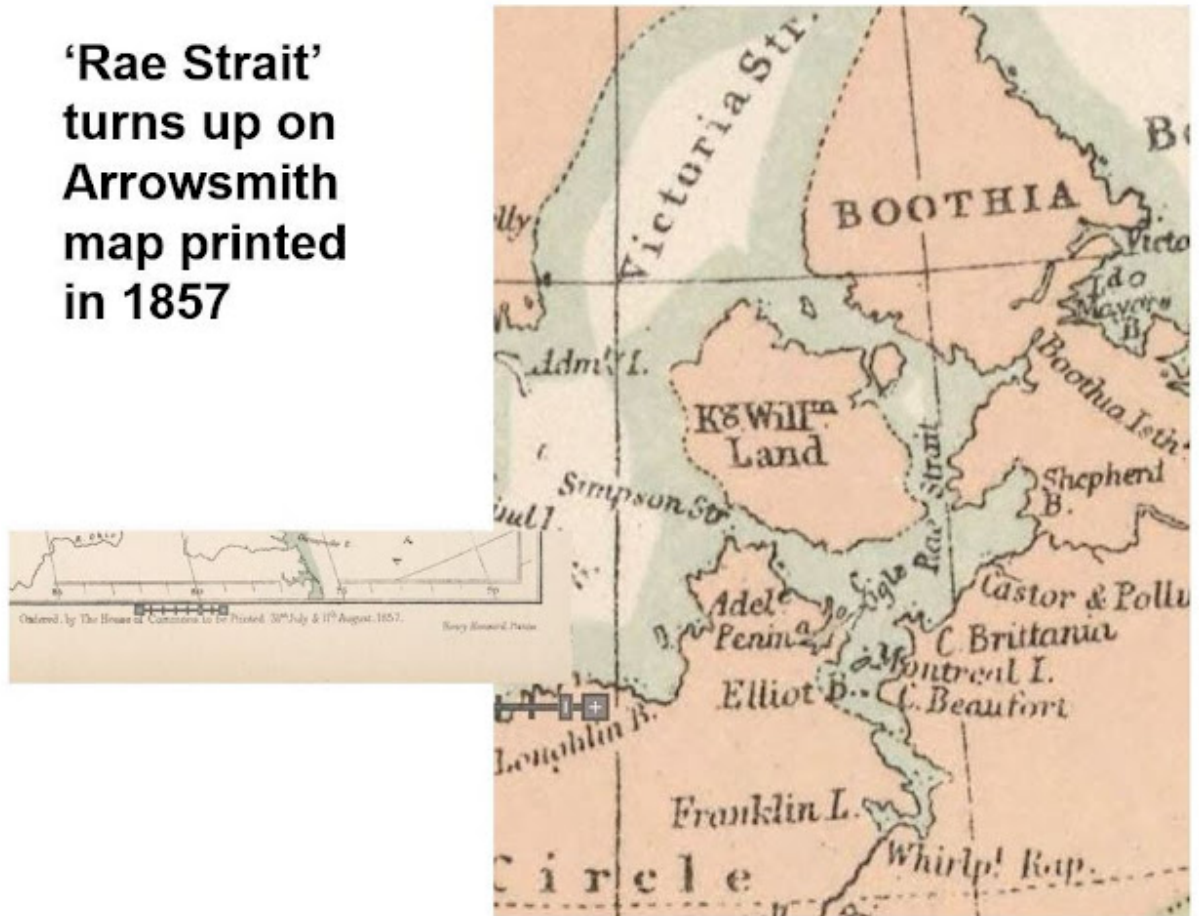


## ORTHODOXY DEFENDERS HOIST ON OWN PETARD by Ken McGoogan Polar Record, online 2 October 2014

William Barr's article on John Rae presents quite the spectacle. 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.

**'Rae Strait'  
turns up on  
Arrowsmith  
map printed  
in 1857**



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 Strait. 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 William Kennedy and Joseph-Rene 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 recognized as the first explorer to navigate the Passage.

In his book about that voyage, 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 Land from the mainland. In all probability through this strait is the only navigable route for the voyage round the north coast of America. This is the only passage which is free from destructive pack ice."

But now we find Barr arguing that Rae Strait was NOT the last link to be discovered. And this is where we enter the spectacle. By insisting that certain sections of the Passage remained "undiscovered" even after 1854, Barr repudiates the claim he set out to defend. I refer to the assertion etched in stone in Westminster Abbey, which hails Franklin for "completing the discovery of the Northwest Passage."

Those who have done their homework know that I am no champion of Franklin. But I do acknowledge that in 1846, the good Sir John sailed south down Peel Strait from Lancaster Sound to the northwest corner of King William Island. I reject the corollary to this claim -- that his men "forged the last link with their lives" -- because those ill-fated sailors slogged south along a coastline where no Passage existed, and where none would become navigable for a century.

But again, yes: Franklin did sail south to King William Island. Of that achievement, he left tangible proof. He established a navigable Northwest Passage all the way south to where he got trapped in the ice. Unlike Barr and his friends, I accept that in 1846, John Franklin discovered much of the north-south part of the first navigable Northwest Passage. Who cares about an uncharted stretch of coastline that he sailed past?

Certainly not Rae, who extended the work of Franklin. The good Sir John discovered the second-last link in the Northwest Passage. In 1854, eight years after Franklin got trapped in the ice off King William Island, Rae gleaned from Inuit hunters what Sir John had accomplished. On that same expedition, Rae discovered the final link in the Passage, the one Amundsen used -- the short waterway, Rae Strait, linking the

north-south channel established by Franklin (and James Clark Ross) with the coastal channel previously determined by Thomas Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Rae built a cairn to mark his discovery of Rae Strait. In 1999, with two fellow adventurers, I went north and placed a plaque beside the remains of that cairn -- a homage to Rae and his companions, an Inuk and an Ojibway. I tell that story in the epilogue to *Fatal Passage*.

Getting John Rae into Westminster Abbey stands as a notable victory. Hats off to Alistair Carmichael and his fellow Orcadians for having the courage, resolve, and political muscle to make it happen. Yet clearly, though now the nay-sayers stand exposed, flailing in self-contradiction, we can expect more denial, more waffling, more nit-picking and prevarication.

With *Fatal Passage*, *Lady Franklin's Revenge*, the forewords to new editions of John Rae's *Arctic Journals* and *John Rae's Arctic Correspondence* (forthcoming), as well as articles in *Canada's History* magazine and a book to be published in 2017, I will have done what I can. For complete vindication of John Rae, I look to posterity.