

Ancient Mariner: The Amazing Adventures of Samuel Hearne the Sailor Who Walked to the Arctic Ocean. By Ken McGoogan. (Toronto: HarperFlamingo Canada, 2003. 320 p., ill., maps. ISBN 0-00-200098-9 \$36.95)

Rita Griffin-Short

Volume 28, 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800483ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800483ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Griffin-Short, R. (2005). Review of [*Ancient Mariner: The Amazing Adventures of Samuel Hearne the Sailor Who Walked to the Arctic Ocean.* By Ken McGoogan. (Toronto: HarperFlamingo Canada, 2003. 320 p., ill., maps. ISBN 0-00-200098-9 \$36.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 28, 71–75. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800483ar>

Science / Science

***Ancient Mariner: The Amazing Adventures of Samuel Hearne the Sailor Who Walked to the Arctic Ocean.* By Ken McGoogan.** (Toronto: HarperFlamingo Canada, 2003. 320 p., ill., maps. ISBN 0-00-200098-9 \$36.95)

Until the fall of Quebec in 1759 when Britain's empire expanded, the Hudson's Bay Company had enjoyed a monopoly of the fur trade. Competition from Montreal was now forcing it to rethink trading methods that from the beginning in 1670 had centered on its Bay forts. Moreover, pressure was mounting to reopen the search for a northwest passage to the Pacific while rumours of copper deposits needed investigation.

Samuel Hearne (1745-1792), the subject of *Ancient Mariner*, was the first European to see Arctic waters and write about it. Living with and as a native, he recorded their habits, noted the fish and wildlife as he surveyed and mapped his route from Fort Prince of Wales to the mouth of

the Coppermine River at Coronation Gulf. His journey answered the two urgent questions that had sent him there. No channel was crossed between the Bay and the Gulf, thus any further search for one must be further north. The reputed copper beds were deemed insignificant, inaccessible from the Gulf if they had been useful. His return in 1772 with a wealth of new information put him in the top rank of Arctic explorers.

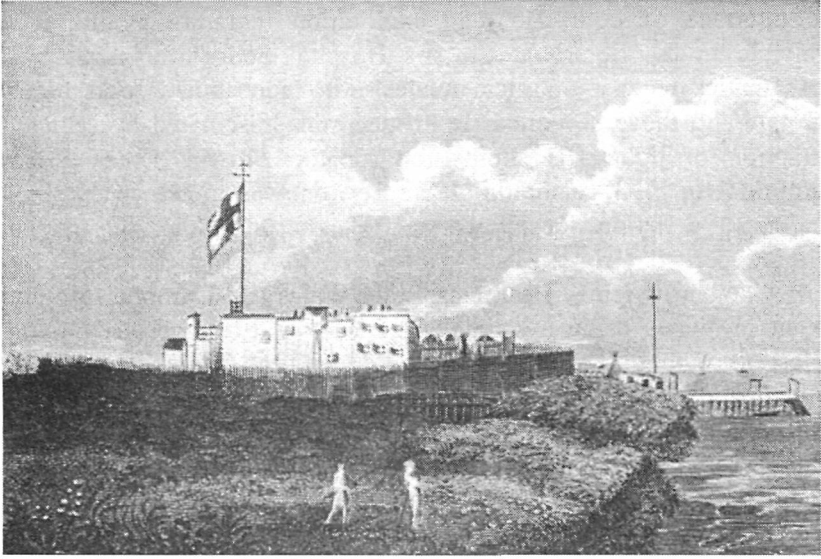
Hearne was born and died in London, but is said to have spent his childhood in Dorset until he went to sea at age 12 in 1757. After six years in the Royal Navy during the Seven Years War, the Hudson's Bay Company employed him in 1766 for its black whale fishery that operated along the northwest coast of the Bay from its base at Fort Prince of Wales on the Churchill River. During a stop at Marble Island he found the remains of James Knight's ill-fated quest for a passage west from the Bay. His interpretation was later questioned by the historian Glyn Williams (*Voyages of Delusion*, Harper Collins, 2002); the first but not the last time he would find himself at odds with general opinion. His resourcefulness and initiative made him the ideal choice for the Coppermine.

After two false starts in 1769 and 1770, neither of which was his fault, Hearne left the fort in December 1770 with the Chipewyan Chief, Matonabee, his guide to the "far off copper river." The Coppermine drains a large area of the eastern barrens north of the treeline. The results of his journey would be published in 1795, three years after his death. Its centrepiece is a controversial description of a premeditated massacre of some Inuit by his companions at a place he named "Bloody Falls" near the mouth of the Coppermine. The published version was elaborated by a dramatic account of the spearing of a young girl.

Of more importance was the loss of his quadrant, an Elton, a cumbersome, faulty, instrument, more than 30 years old that was smashed by a gust of wind. Without it he was unable to determine his latitude which was later found to be almost 4 degrees too far north. This had implications for James Cook whose instructions were based on Hearne's latitude: he should search for a passage north of 65 degrees latitude during his 1778 *Resolution* Pacific Coast survey. Alexander Dalrymple (1737-1808), the East India Company's retired hydrographer, with a keen interest in the Northwest Passage, a friend of the Company's Samuel Wegg, was given Hearne's charts which he corrected, not without criticism.

In 1773, Hearne established the Company's first inland post, Cumberland House, on the Saskatchewan River. He became governor of

Prince of Wales in 1775, overseeing new changes that included a growing interest in science and natural history.



Samuel Hearne sketch of York Fort
(Source: Ken McGoogan, *Ancient Mariner*, 188.)

Prince of Wales, the most northern and largest fort, is a massive stone fortress, but poorly constructed. Its illusion of strength belied its indefensibility for it lacked potable water. In October 1782, three French ships appeared under the leadership of Jean-Francois de Galaup, Comte de la Perouse. As America's ally during its war for independence, France sought to destroy the Bay forts. Hearne, with more cannon than men, prudently gave up as did York Factory. La Perouse gallantly returned Hearne's journals, agreeing to let him sail the fort's trading vessel, *Severn*, back to Britain with his men. He was back next spring to build a new fort further upriver and in 1787 deteriorating health took him back to London where he worked on his journals until his death.

Of his life beyond his Bay employment we know little and that from an unauthenticated and unsigned obituary, published in 1797 with the unattributed portrait that appears, transposed, on the jacket of *Ancient Mariner*.

A growing literature has been reassessing Hearne during the past two decades. A serious biography was long overdue. Unfortunately, Ken McGoogan's *Ancient Mariner* fails to meet the challenge. He offers an uncritical pastiche of fiction masquerading as history.

McGoogan argues, unconvincingly, that the “mariner” of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is Hearne. Coleridge, an amalgam of “enlightenment” and “romanticism,” stood at the interface of both. He read exploration literature avidly, it was available in the library at Christ’s Hospital School, amassed by his mathematics teacher, William Wales, who contributed to it his own journals and those he edited. Both men were fascinated by optics, the refraction of light. His submission for the Browne Greek Prize at Cambridge in 1793, celebrating Isaac Newton, was an *Ode to Astronomy*. McGoogan’s fiction doesn’t work. If Hearne and Coleridge ever met, neither recorded it.

McGoogan imagines Hearne assisting Wales and Dymond to time the transit of Venus using a sundial. Hearne would have been whaling in June 1769. Though Dymond’s watch did gain time, Wales’s compensated with his own as his astronomical journal records. (*Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 59, 1769: 467-488) The late John D. Light, Parks Canada historian, has researched and published the sundial, carved of local fossiliferous sandstone (*Journal of the American Scientific Instrument Enterprise*, 13, 1999: 107-114).

The so-called “Matonabee” map given to Moses Norton, upon which Norton based his decision to explore the Coppermine, is accepted by McGoogan as a fake though it has been masterfully decoded by the anthropologist June Helm (“Matonabee’s Map,” *Arctic Anthropology*, 26, 1989: 28-47.)

Hearne’s childhood in Beamister remains unsubstantiated as does the Samuel Hood connexion. Might Hearne have been one of the 295 lads sent to sea at Portsmouth in 1757 by the Marine Society? When discharged he would have been one of the 150,000 men left to fend for themselves in a post war depressed economy where food riots were the order of the day. McGoogan neglects the role seamen like Hearne played during the demonstrations of the 1760s. They wanted higher wages, threatened to disrupt shipping. One wonders if desperation led Hearne to join the Company, another male-only institution.

Red Lion Square is some distance from the Company’s offices in Fenchurch Street. Was Hearne’s decision to live there because it accommodated other men of science or a coincidence? Inventor of the chronometer, John Harrison, lived on Lee Street. His neighbour was Jonas Hanway, one of the Navy’s victualling commissioners, founder of the Marine Society. Did his friends William Wales or Samuel Wegg, the Company’s Governor to whom Hearne dedicated his book, suggest the Square? Who attended Hearne during his illness and death? Where was

his sister? As a dissenter where would he have been buried? Who painted the portrait and when? This reader would have liked to know.

Ancient Mariner is facile and repetitive; its focus confused, its research spotty. The editing is unfortunate and citations, e.g. for William Wales, are inaccurate. There is no reference for Wales's portrait or its accompanying comment that it was painted in return for a sketch of the moon. The serious reader must regret the lack of scholarly apparatus.

RITA GRIFFIN-SHORT
Hamilton, Ontario