

IRISH GIANTS

IRISH GIANTS OF THE 1700s

In the 1700s several famous Irish show giants made their living exhibiting themselves in Britain and across Europe. Amongst them the skeletons were studied in detail of Cornelius MaGrath (1736–1760), Patrick Cotter (1760 – 1806) and Charles Byrne (1761-1783).

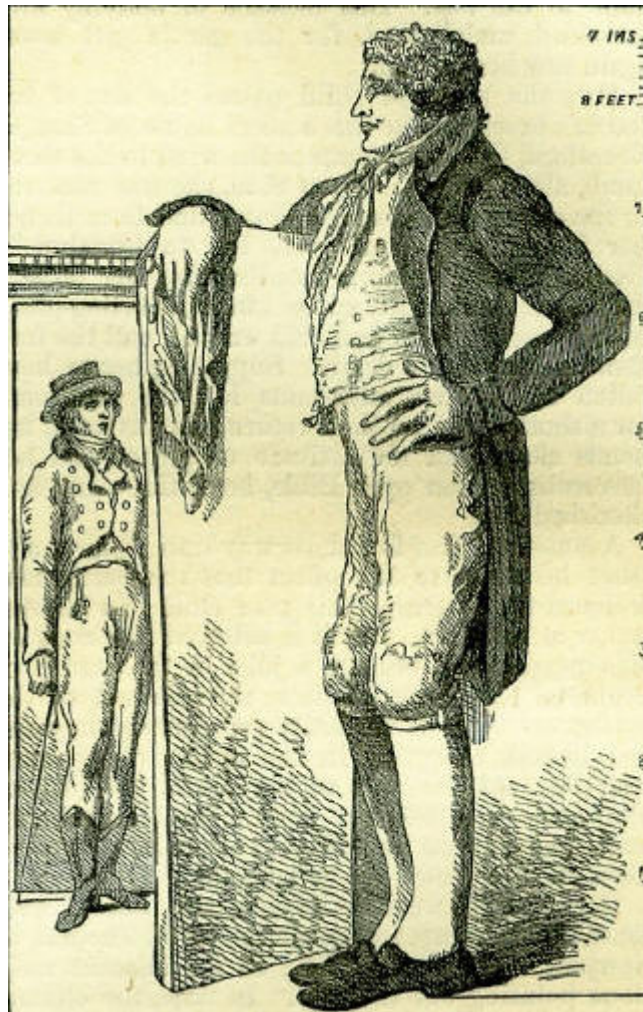
CORNELIUS MAGRATH

PROFESSOR D. J. CUNNINGHAM. M.D., F.R.S. writes in 1902: -Cornelius Magrath, the Irish Giant. The skeleton of Magrath was exhibited, by special permission of Trinity College, Dublin. Magrath was born in Tipperary in 1736, and died in Dublin in 1760; his stature was 7 ft. 5 in., but he seems (in spite of some contemporary advertisements) to have been decrepit, knock-kneed, and nearly blind.



PATRICK COTTER

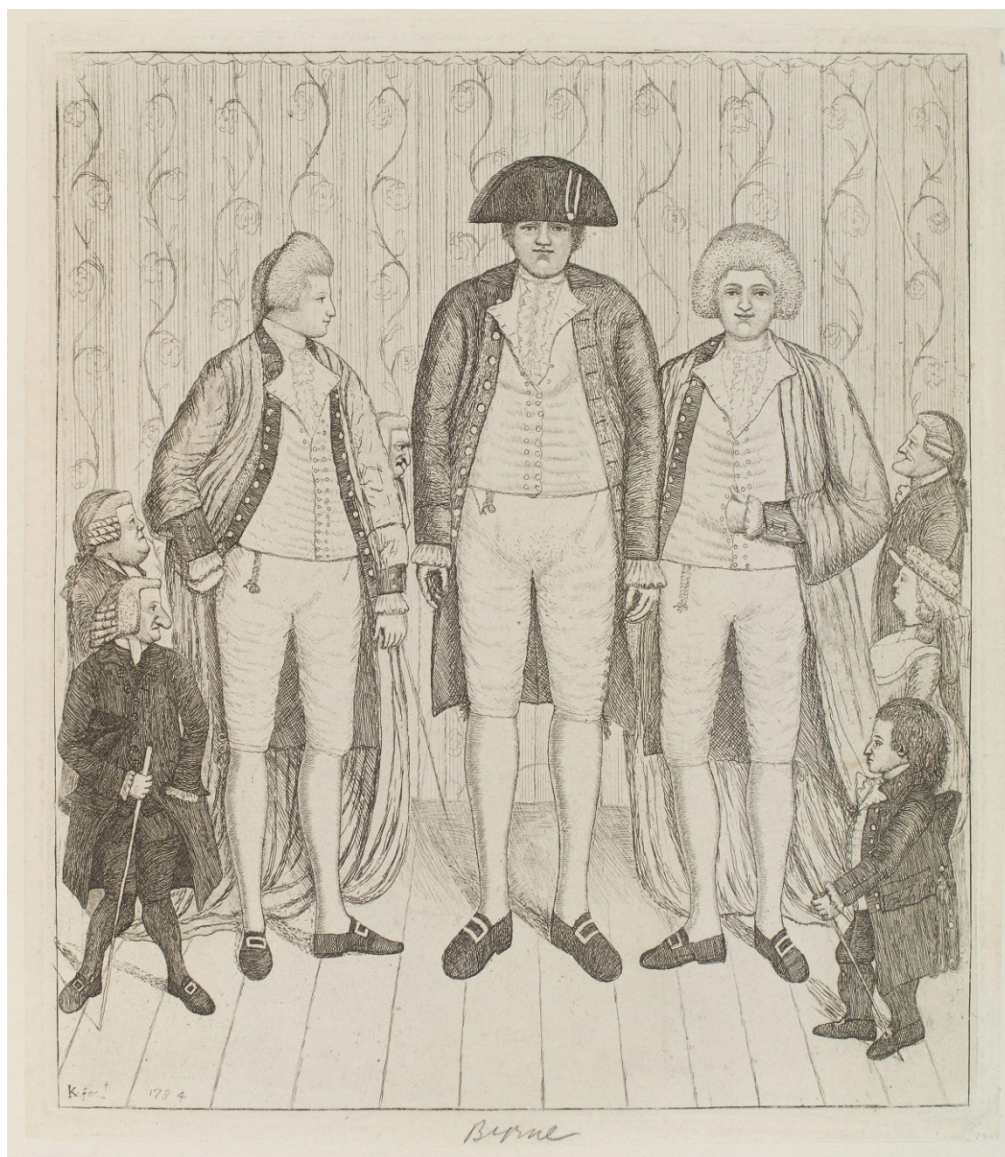
Patrick Cotter was the first of only twelve people in medical history to stand at a verified height of eight feet (2.43 m) or more. Cotter died in Bristol on September 18, 1806, aged 46. His remains were exhumed in 1972 and were examined in great detail and described in a book: *The Irish giant* by G. Frankcom & J.H. Musgrave. Cotter was subsequently reburied but in 1986 during a redevelopment in the area his remains were identified and then cremated after a church service.



Patrick Cotter is depicted in the above image. The image claimed that the giant was 8 feet 7 inches tall and it was common for show giants to exaggerate their true size. The fact that Cotter is leaning on a door for support gives some insight into the problems he must have faced in his daily life.

CHARLES BYRNE

One of the most interesting Irish giants from this era is Charles Byrne (1761-1783). Byrne came from a small village called Littlebridge in County Tyrone and was reputed to have been related to the Knipe Twins, also giants who came from the nearby village of Magherafelt.



This image claims to show Byrne along with the Knipe Twins. If the twins did indeed have pituitary gigantism then family members sharing this very rare disease was an early clue that the condition could have a genetic basis.

Charles Byrne arrived in London in April of 1782. During his time in London he met with George III and became a major celebrity. Unfortunately Byrne's health deteriorated and he began to drink heavily, perhaps to escape the physical pains associated with gigantism.

Byrne died in London on Sunday 1st June 1783 aged just 22. After his death his body was stolen and sold to the surgeon John Hunter. Byrne's skeleton remains on display at the Hunterian Museum in London. It would appear that Byrne was approximately 7 feet 8 inches tall or 2.33metres at the time of his death.

Subsequent examination of Byrne's skull by surgeons in the 1900s revealed that he had a greatly enlarged pituitary fossa which presumably was expanded by force from a growing pituitary tumour. This confirmed that Byrne was a pituitary giant. In 2009 Professor Márta Korbonits with permission from the Hunterian Museum extracted a sample of Byrne's DNA.

The result showed that Byrne had an AIP mutation. Byrne shares this mutation with a number of Irish patients with pituitary adenomas living today, altogether 54 carriers were identified until 2010 (some affected with the disease and some only carrying the mutated gene). All these patients have one common ancestor in whom the original mutation occurred. It is currently believed that this person lived at some time around 500AD in Ireland, but the range of his estimate is wide from ~400-3700 years ago.



The skeleton of Charles Byrne, Professor Márta Korbonits and patient Brendan Holland. Charles Byrne and Brendan Holland share an identical AIP mutation. The connection between these two giants has also been the subject of a BBC documentary.

It is not known at this point if the other historical Irish giants are also linked genetically to Charles Byrne.

OTHER FAMOUS IRISH GIANTS

There have been other famous Irish giants though we know less about them and some of the stories associated with these giants were clearly invented for publicity purposes.

THE PORTRUSH GIANTESS

In his Short History of Human Prodigies, Dwarfs, etc., James Paris du Plessis mentions that while in London in 1696 he saw a handsome, well-proportioned "giantess who was seven feet high without her shoes, who was born in the Isle of Portrush, not far from the wonderful Causeway in the most northern part of Ireland." In 1701, he saw her again at Montpellier in Languedoc, France, exhibiting herself at a fair. "I not knowing she was the same I had seen five years before in London, and though I was something disguised by wearing a periwig, she remembered me very well and told me where she had seen me."

EDMUND MALONE

Edmund Malone was an Irish Giant who was believed to have appeared before the Court of Charles II in 1684. The amazed king walked under his outstretched arm, an event that Malone mentioned thereafter in his handbills, as in the following:

"The Gyant; or the Miracle of Nature. Being that so much admired young man, aged nineteen years last June, 1684. Born in Ireland, of such a prodigious height and bigness, and every way proportionable, the like hath not been seen since the memory of man: he hath been several times shown at court, and his majesty was pleased to walk under his arm, and he is grown very much since, he now reaches ten foot and a half, fathoms near eight foot, spans fifteen inches; and is believed to be as big as one of the giants in Guildhall. He is to be seen at the sign of the Catherine Wheell in Southwark fair. Vivat Rex."

JAMES MACDONALD

The Annual Register for 1760 reports that James MacDonald, who attained to a height of seven feet six inches, died at his home near Cork-at the great age of one hundred and seventeen years. MacDonald was said to have worked as a touring giant, a Grenadier and a labourer. It seems likely in this instance that not only was MacDonald's height exaggerated but also his age.

JAMES KIRKLAND

Kirkland came from Ballygar, in County Longford. Known as the "Soldier King", he was one of the tallest soldiers recruited by Friedrich Wilhelm I, King of Prussia for his regiment of tall soldiers often called the Potsdam Giants. Kirkland was believed to have been around seven feet tall. It is claimed that he was accompanied in the regiment by other tall soldiers from Ireland.



PATRICK MURPHY (1834–1862)

Patrick Murphy was born in Killowen, Co. Down on the 15th June 1834. His family lived on a farm in the Mourne Mountains beside the shore of Carlingford Lough. As a young man he worked at a hotel in Liverpool where he started to draw crowds of people who wanted to see him because of his great height. He subsequently decided to quit waiting tables and began a career as show giant.

In May of 1857, the Emperor and Empress of Austria invited the touring giant to appear before them. Five years later he died of smallpox at Marseilles, at the age of twenty-six. Murphy was reputed to have amassed a small fortune during his career. At the time of his death it was claimed that he measured almost nine feet tall and weighed three hundred and thirty-six pounds. It is believed that his true height was 7 feet 3 inches.

After his death Murphy's body was returned to Ireland and he is buried in the village of Rostrevor. As he had died of small pox the casket was closed and there remains some speculation amongst local people as to whether the giant's body was actually in the coffin.



HUGH MURPHY (1842 – 1875)

James Hugh Murphy Jr. was born in 1842 in Waterford, Ireland and died in 1875 in Baltimore. He was known as the Irish Giant and the Baltimore Giant. He toured with P.T. Barnum. He was billed as being over 8' tall.



GIANTS IN FOLKLORE

Irish folklore contains many references to giants. Giants were believed to have built aspects of the natural landscape and many Irish place names contain references to giants. It is possible that some of this folklore was inspired by real subjects with pituitary gigantism.

The most famous giant in Irish folklore is Finn Mac Cuamhail (McCool). Finn was a mythical warrior and a giant. Stories about Finn claimed that he had built the Giant's Causeway in County Antrim as stepping-stones to Scotland. It was also believed that he had scooped part of Ireland out of the ground to fling at a rival. This clump of land fell into the sea and became the Isle of Man and the void left behind became Lough Neagh.



The Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland

There have been other references to giants in Irish history. It is often claimed that the legendary Irish king Brian Boru who died in 1014 was himself a giant.

