New Information Concerning the Irish Giant

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Although John Hunter and Harvey Cushing were separated by more than a century they joined in the evaluation of the famed Irish giant, Charles O'Brien.

Both men were primarily surgeons, yet there are unique parallels in their broader achievements. Hunter's interests in inflammation, bone growth, pathological anatomy and his biological collection are mirrored in Cushing's interests in typhoid infections, endocrinology, neuropathology and his collection of medical books. The "Hunterian chancre" and the "Cushing syndrome" brought each man's name into everyday medical usage, yet their greatest achievements were probably as surgical teachers. Hunter has been called the father of surgery and Cushing is generally regarded as the father of neurosurgery.

This report attempts to verify certain aspects of the giant's life and death, pointing out the interest both men had in the skeleton. Skull films of the giant have been obtained for the first time and demonstrate the classical features of acromegaly.

Charles Byrne, later called O'Brien, was born in Littlebridge, Ireland, and his huge size was attributed to his conception on the top of a haystack. His parents were of normal size but in a nearby village twin sons were born to the Knipe family, supposedly related to Byrne, and grew to over seven feet tall. As a child Byrne "grew like a cornstalk" but was unpopular because he was "always dribbling and spitting and troubled with pains." In late adolescence he was exhibited at local fairs by Joe Vance who as his agent brought him to London at the age of twenty-one in April, 1782.5

He was first exhibited in London at Spring Gardens with advertisements claiming: "He is the tallest man in the world. His height is eight feet two inches and in full proportion accordingly." A Rowlandson cartoon (Fig. 1) and etchings by Kay (Figs. 2 and 3) attest to his impressive stature. The initial admission fee was half a crown but with a decline in business the charge was dropped to one shilling. Enough money was accumulated, however, to enable the giant to possess a 700 pound note and to support his habit of alcoholic excess. On April 23, 1783, a local newspaper recorded:

"The Irish Giant, a few evenings since, taking a lunar ramble was tempted to visit the Black Horse, a little public house facing the King's mews, and before he returned to his own apartments found himself a less man by the loss of 700 pounds in bank notes which had been taken from his pocket."

Shortly thereafter, on or about June 1, 1783, the giant died suddenly at the age of twenty-two and the Annual Register on June 30th published the following account:

"In Cockspur Street, Charing Cross, aged only 22, Mr. Charles Byrne, the Irish Giant, whose death is said to have been precipitated by excessive drinking to which he was always addicted, but more particularly since his late loss of about all his property which he had simply invested in a single bank note of 700 pounds. In his last moments he requested that his ponderous remains might be thrown into the sea in order that his bones might be placed far out of reach of the chirurgical fraternity in consequence of which the body was shipped on board a vessel to be conveyed to the Downs to be sunk in 20 fathoms of water. We have reason to believe, however, that this report is merely a "tub thrown out to the whale." It is said that John Hunter bribed the undertaker to substitute stones for the body, forwarding the body to Hunter who took it in his carriage to Earl's Court."

The enthusiastic and competitive interest in the giant's body is shown in the following news reports:

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June 5, 1783: “The whole tribe of surgeons put in claims for the poor departed Irish giant and surrounded his house just as Greenland harpooners would an enormous whale. One of them has gone so far as to have a niche made for himself in the giant’s coffin.”

June 13, 1783: “Since the death of the Irish Giant there have been more physical consulta-

Fig. 1. The Rowlandson cartoon exhibited in the John Hunter Museum, showing the Irish Giant with friends.

Fig. 2. An etching by Kay showing the Irish Giant in the company of the Knipe brothers, also giants and supposedly related to him.

Fig. 3. Another Kay etching of the Irish Giant.