

# The Tragic Story of Charles Byrne

## “The Irish Giant”

Charles Byrne was born in 1761 in the small village of Littlebridge, Ireland near the border of Derry and Tyrone County. His Irish father and Scottish mother were of normal stature and his mother was unflatteringly described as being “a stout woman with a strong voice.” There was a legend among the locals that his parents “had a love affair when they were high up in a haystack and from the lofty situation the common people imagined it had an effect on the woman’s conception and gave occasion to this great offspring”. Charles himself was not an unusually large baby but this had changed by early childhood when he “grew like a cornstalk”, rapidly exceeding the heights of his playmates and soon towering over the adults of the village. It is said that when the boy giant was at school “he was always driveling or spitting and the other boys would not sit beside him, and he was very much troubled with pains (‘growing pains’).” By the time Charles was a teenager, news of the astounding young giant spread throughout the countryside. Joe Vance, an entrepreneuring showman from the nearby village of Coagh, soon took notice and convinced Byrne’s parents that he could be their ticket to fortune. Acting as his manager, Vance exhibited Charles at local fairs and markets as a one man curiosity show. The young giant far exceeded his manager’s expectations attracting thrilled spectators everywhere he went and soon inspired greater aspirations for fame and wealth. Convinced that he could attract much larger crowds and thus more money could be made, Vance decided that the young “Irish Giant” would tour England and possibly other parts of the European continent.

After exhibiting himself throughout Scotland and Northern England, the Irish Giant steadily made his way towards London. He was quite a success in Edinburgh, where the night watchmen were amazed at the sight of him lighting his pipe from one of the streetlamps on North Bridge without even standing on tiptoe. The giant encountered great difficulty in maneuvering up and down the narrow stairs of the old town, resorting to crawling on his hands and knees in attempts to navigate his way through the confined spaces. By the time the Irish Giant arrived in London on April 11, 1782, he was already a national celebrity. The following advertisement appeared in a newspaper on the 24<sup>th</sup> that month:

**“IRISH GIANT. To be seen this, and every day this week, in his large elegant room, at the cane shop, next door to late Cox’s Museum, Spring Gardens, Mr. Byrne, the surprising Irish Giant, who is allowed to be the tallest man in the world; his height is eight feet two inches, and in full proportion accordingly; only 21 years of age. His stay will not be long in London, as he proposes shortly to visit the Continent.”**

This remarkable young giant captivated the capital. Byrne entertained audiences from 11:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. and from 5:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M. six days a week for a relatively hefty fee of two shillings sixpence per person from his splendidly decorated apartment in Spring Gardens, near Charing Cross. The crowds were amazed by the gentle giant who was elegantly dressed in a frock coat, waistcoat, knee breeches, silk stockings, frilled cuffs and collar, topped by a three-cornered hat. Byrne spoke graciously with his thunderous voice and displayed the refined manners of a gentleman. The giant’s large,

square jaw, wide forehead, and slightly stooped shoulders enhanced his mild disposition.

The following quote from a newspaper dated May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1782 demonstrates the considerable attention he received.

**“However striking a curiosity may be, there is generally some difficulty in engaging the attention of the public; but even this was not the case with the modern living Colossus, or wonderful Irish Giant; for no sooner was he arrived at an elegant apartment at the cane shop, in Spring Garden-gate, next door to Cox’s Museum, than the curious of all degrees resorted to see him, being the sensible that a prodigy like this never made its appearance among us before; and the most penetrating have frankly declared, that neither the tongue of the most florid orator, or pen of the most ingenious writer, can sufficiently describe the elegance, symmetry, and proportion of this wonderful phenomenon in nature, and that all descriptions must fall infinitely short of giving that satisfaction which may be obtained on a judicious inspection.”**

The Irish Giant had become the talk of the town. Newspapers printed flattering reports of his physique while gossip columnists speculated on his love life. Within just a few weeks of his arrival, Byrne had met the king and queen, been renowned by members of the nobility, and been presented before the Royal Society, its members’ eager to assess his extraordinary stature and offer theories about his baffling condition. His popularity was such that the summer pantomime at the Haymarket Theater was entitled, in reference to Byrne, “Harlequin Teague: or the Giant’s Causeway” which had nearly a month long run to elated audiences.



“The Surprising Irish Giant” Illustration of Charles Byrne by the cartoonist Thomas Rowlandson

Another advertisement for the Irish Giant appeared in August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1782 further demonstrating the excitement that he had aroused:

**'Just arrived in London, and to be seen in an elegant apartment, at the cane-shop, in Spring Garden-gate, next door to the house late Cox's Museum, the Living Colossus, or wonderful Irish Giant, only 21 years of age, measures eight feet two inches high. This extraordinary young man has been seen by abundance of the nobility and gentry, likewise of the faculty, Royal Society and other admirers of natural curiosities, who allow him to surpass anything of the same kind ever offered to the public. His address is singular and pleasing, his person truly shaped and proportioned to his height, and affords an agreeable surprise; he excels the famous Maximilian Miller, born in 1674, shown in London in 1733, and the late Swedish giant will scarce admit of comparison. To enumerate every particular would be too tedious, let it suffice to say, that he is beyond what is set forth in ancient or modern history. The ingenious and judicious, who have honoured him with their company, have bestowed the greatest encomiums on him, and on their departure have expressed their approbation and satisfaction. In short, the sight of him is more than the mind can conceive, the tongue express, or pencil delineate, and stands without a parallel in this or any other country. "Take him for all in all, we shall scarce look on his like again"-Shakespear. Ladies and gentlemen are respectfully informed that the hours of admittance are from eleven in the morning till four in the afternoon and from six to seven in the evening every day, Sundays excepted. Admittance 2s. 6d.'**

One visitor who was especially captivated with his meeting with the Irish Giant was Count Joseph Boruwlaski, better known as the "Polish Dwarf." Boruwlaski had arrived in London from Europe only weeks before Byrne. Being a man of education and musical accomplishment, the dwarf was disinclined to exhibit himself simply as just another human oddity and would instead entertain his admirers. Well-loved by the aristocracy and sponsored by many, he published his memoirs in 1788, in which the following is taken:

*"We landed at Margate in 1782, and a few days after set out for London....A short time after my arrival in London there came also a stupendous giant. He was eight feet three or four inches high, his physiognomy agreeable; and, what is very uncommon in men of his sort, his strength was equal to his size: he was at the time only two-and-twenty. Many persons were desirous of seeing us together; my protectors, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, being one day to see him, in company with Lady Spencer, they were so kind as to take me with them. Our surprise was, I think, equal; the giant remained a moment speechless, viewing me with looks of astonishment; then stooping very low to present me his hand, which easily have contained a dozen like mine, he made a very polite compliment. Had a painter been present, the contrast of our figures might have suggested to him the idea of an interesting picture; for having come very near him, the better to show the difference, it appeared that his knee was nearly upon level with the top of my head."*

Several contemporary diarists and letter writers mention visits to the famous Irish Giant. One such reference can be found in the *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay (Frances Burney, 1778-1840)*. In the letter from Miss Burney to Mr. Crisp, dated October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1782, where she is referring to a conversation with Pasquale Paoli regarding a recent encounter with the giant:

*'Afterwards speaking of the Irish giant who is now shown in town, he said: "He is so large, I am as a baby! I look at him-Oh! I find myself so little as a child! Indeed, my indignation it rises when I see him hold up his hand so high. I am as nothing, and I find myself in the power of a man who fetches from me half-a-crown".'*

Not all were impressed by the sight of Mr. Byrne. Syllas Neville, a prominent physician of the time, recorded in his diary his observations of the giant.

*"Tall men walk considerably beneath his arm, but he stoops, is not well shaped, his flesh is loose, and his appearance far from wholesome. His voice sounds like thunder, and he is an ill-bred beast, though very young – only in his 22<sup>d</sup> year."*

After an enormously successful debut in the grand city of London it seems as if the fascination with the Irish Giant had started to fade. Towards the end of 1782, Byrne changed locations from Charing Cross to Piccadilly as evident from the following newspaper notice dated November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1782:

**'Irish Giant. The Irish Giant embraces, in the most respectful manner, the earliest opportunity of acquainting the nobility, gentry, &c., that he has removed from Mr. Mittenius's, Charing Cross, to the sign of the Hampshire Hog, No.1 Piccadilly, where he continues to be seen this and every day (Sundays excepted). This modern Colossus is but 22 years of age, measures upwards of eight feet two inches high, is well proportioned to his height, and is allowed by all who have seen him, to be the greatest natural curiosity ever seen in this or any other kingdom. Hours of admittance from eleven in the morning till four in the afternoon, and from six till seven at night. Admittance to ladies and gentlemen, 2s. 6d.; children and servants in livery, 1s.**

**N.B. To prevent any misunderstanding, no person will be admitted for one shilling, except children and servants in livery.'**

An item of note is that although "ladies and gentlemen" were still charged 2s. 6d. but children and servants were allowed in for just 1s. By early 1783, the public had grown weary of the Irish Giant and began to seek out other attractions. Further complicating his predicament, rumors of Byrne's financial success inspired other giants to try their luck in the capital city. Some of his competition came in the form of the Gigantic Twin Brothers named Knipe, who were from a village in Ireland only five miles from Byrne's birthplace. The Knipe twins even claimed to be relatives of Byrne. Byrne was particularly annoyed that another gigantic Irishman by the name of Patrick Cotter was also exhibiting himself in nearby towns. Cotter and Byrne both often presented themselves under the surname O'Brien, claiming to be lineal descendants of the legendary Irish monarch, Brian Boru. Patrick Cotter had won acclaim in Bristol and was considering making his debut in London. Cotter blatantly had his eyes on Byrne's crown, as evident by the claim in his advertisements "The Giant is upwards of Four Inches taller than the noted Burn." Byrne had also developed, at an early age, the habit of drinking vast quantities of gin and whiskey. He often arrived at his exhibitions quite inebriated. Because of the Giant's perpetual state of drunkenness and lack of punctuality, shows often had to be canceled. With crowds dwindling and faced with competition from rival attractions, Joe Vance made the decision to relocate the Irish Giant yet again to a cheaper apartment and further reduced the price of admission to 1s for all.

This is evident in the following advertisement extracted from a newspaper in early 1783:

**'Irish Giant. The Irish Giant respectfully informs the nobility, gentry and public in general, that he has removed to an elegant apartment at Mr. Hayne's, No. 12 Cockspur Street, where he is seen from 11 to 4 and 6 to 7, each day, Sunday excepted. This truly amazing phenomenon is indisputably the most extraordinary production of the human species ever beheld since the days of Goliath, as has been sufficiently demonstrated from the repeated approbation of numbers of the first characters in Great Britain and Ireland, as well as foreigners of the first distinction, from several of whom he has had the most pressing invitations to visit the continent. This astonishing Colossus is but 22 years of age, and measures upwards of eight feet two inches in height; nor does that size, however amazing, afford less satisfaction to the spectator, than his exact proportion in every respect. Admittance 1s.'**

Despite the falling revenues, Charles Byrne was able to accumulate enough wealth to possess two bank notes, one for £700 and the other for £70, as well as to support his inclination to alcoholic excess. Byrne foolishly chose to carry these bank notes with him, perhaps thinking who would dare attempt to rob a giant. Unfortunately, he was terribly mistaken. A local newspaper dated April 23, 1783 reported:

**'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 than he had been the beginning of the evening, by the loss of upwards of 700£ in bank notes, which had been taken out of his pocket.'**

Charles Byrne was devastated. Barely a year after his triumphant arrival in London, he had lost everything. Tormented by his ever growing body and destitute over the loss of his life's savings, the Irish Giant sought refuge with even more excessive bouts of drinking. It is also believed that he had by this point contracted consumption (tuberculosis). The combination of these ill-fated events made the Giant weak and sickly. As a result, by May of 1783, Charles Byrne was a dying man.

By now, Byrne was fully aware that his days were numbered. Death itself was not the Giant's greatest fear but rather it was the surgeons. It had come to his attention that a number of the members from the medical society were eager to obtain his body for dissection. Of these surgeons, none was more zealous in acquiring the Giant's body than the famous and infamous John Hunter. By 1783, John Hunter was recognized as the most distinguished physician in London. He had been elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society and in 1776 he was appointed Surgeon Extraordinary to King George the Third. Born with a volatile temperament and an insatiable thirst for knowledge he made enormous contributions to the fields of anatomy and surgery. Hunter is considered by the medical profession to be the "Father of Modern Surgery." Having little use for books, his accomplishments were achieved through dissecting thousands of cadavers provided to him by professional grave robbers known as resurrection men. Hunter dedicated his life's work into an impressive collection of thousands of preparations of over 500 species of plants and animals. He was particularly interested in items that were out of the ordinary realms of nature.

Once Hunter got a glimpse of the magnificent Irish Giant, he knew that he must have his body for his collection.

Although members of the upper levels of society had become progressively more accepting of the need for postmortem dissections to advance medical knowledge, such enlightenment had not spread to the general population. To an uneducated man from a small village in rural Ireland, the thought of being sliced open after death and possibly put on display like a common criminal was simply repulsive. Byrne, as well as the majority of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, had the very real fear that this could deny him entry into heaven at the time of Judgment Day. Determined to outwit the surgeons and especially John Hunter, The Irish Giant made specific arrangements to protect his body from the prying hands of the anatomists. After his death, his body was to be sealed in a lead coffin and to be watched day and night by his loyal Irish friends until it could be sunk deep in the sea, far from the grasp of his pursuers. Using what remained from his life savings, Byrne prepaid the undertakers to ensure that his will be carried out.

Determined not to be outdone by the Giant or any of his professional competition, John Hunter employed the services of a shady figure by the name Howison to keep a close watch on Byrne's whereabouts as well as his deteriorating condition. Howison even took residence in an apartment on Cockspur Street just a few doors from where Byrne was on exhibit. Hunter would be notified within moments of the Giant's passing. By now Byrne suffered from crippling pain caused by his body's uncontrollable growth, excessive sweating, and intense headaches. His voice no longer boomed like thunder as he struggled laboriously for each breath. Hunter knew that death was eminent for the Irish Giant.

On Sunday, June 1 1783, Charles Byrne died at the young age of 22. His death was immediately reported in the newspapers:

**Cockspur Street, Charing Cross, aged 22, Charles Byrne, the famous 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 almost all of his property, which he had simply invested in a single bank note of £700 [sic]. In his last moments (it has been said) that he requested that his ponderous remains might be thrown into the sea, in order that his bones might be place far out of the reach of the chirurgical fraternity.**

No sooner had the Irish Giant passed than the race to obtain his corpse began. A newspaper dated June 5, 1783 demonstrates the enthusiastic and competitive interest in obtaining this extraordinary example of nature:

**'The whole tribe of surgeons put in a claim 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, in order to his being ready at hand, on the "witching time of night, when church-yards yawn".'**

On June 13th another newspaper reported:

**'Since the death of the Irish Giant, there have been more physical consultations held, than ever were convened to keep Harry the Eighth in existence. The object of these Aesculapian deliberations is to get the poor departed giant into their possession; for which purpose they wander after his remains from place to place, and mutter more fee, faw, fums than ever were breathed by the whole gigantic race, when they attempted to scale heaven and dethrone Jupiter.'**

On June 16th, yet another report proclaimed:

**'So anxious are the surgeons to have possession of the Irish Giant, that they have offered a ransom of 800 guineas to the undertakers. This sum if being rejected they are determined to approach the churchyard by regular works, and terrier-like, unearth him.'**

The following was printed on June 18<sup>th</sup>:

**'Byrne's body was shipped on board a vessel in the river last night in order to be conveyed to the Downs, where it is to be sunk in twenty fathom water: the body hunters, however, are determined to pursue their valuable prey even in the profoundest depth of the aquatic regions; and have therefore provided a pair of diving bells, with which they flatter themselves they shall be able to weigh hulk gigantic from its watery grave.'**

As stories of the battle to attain the ill-fated giant's body filled the newspapers, at least Byrne's friends kept their promise to their fallen comrade. After obtaining an oversized coffin and sealing their colossal friend inside, they kept watch over the body for four days. The dimensions of the coffin were given in a newspaper at the time.

**"The coffin of Mr. Charles Byrne, the Irish giant, aged twenty-two years, measures eight feet five inches within side, and the outside case nine feet four inches, and the circumference of his shoulders measures three feet four inches".**

In an effort to collect some last minute profit from their recently departed meal ticket, they exhibited the enormous casket to the public for the fee of two shillings sixpence. Finally, on June 6, they began their 75 mile voyage to transport the deceased giant to the seaside town of Margate. *The Edinburgh Evening Courant* reported:

**"Yesterday morning, June 6, the body of Byrne, the famous Irish giant, (who died a few days ago), was carried to Margate, in order to be thrown into the sea, agreeable to his own request, he having been apprehensive that the surgeons would anatomise him".**

Once they arrived, a boat was chartered and the massive coffin was plunged into the sea. Whatever it was the grieving Irishmen dumped into the water that day, it was not the body of Charles Byrne.

As soon as the news of the Irish Giant's disposal was reported, rumors speculating on what actually happened to his body began to circulate. After giving the information of the giant's burial at sea, the *Annual Register* for 1783 went on to claim: *'We have reason, however, to believe that this report is merely*

*a tub thrown out to the whale.’ British Magazine wrote off the burial as “pure fiction.” The Annual Reporter Chronicle accused John Hunter directly stating, “The giant expressed an earnest desire that his ponderous remains might be sunk out at sea; but if such were his wish, it was never fulfilled, as Mr. Hunter obtained his body before interment of any kind had taken place.”*

The precise details on how the remains of the Irish Giant came into John Hunter’s possession are not known. Hunter himself never explicitly described his audacious scheme to capture the body of Charles Byrne. The most popular account that has surfaced is as follows. Upon receiving word from Mr. Howison that the Giant had expired, Hunter immediately leapt into action and wasted no time locating the undertaker who was responsible for executing the will of Charles Byrne. Hunter managed to bribe the unscrupulous undertaker at the steep price of £500 into securing the giant’s body for him. The undertaker’s accomplices switched the Giant’s body for paving stones in a barn outside a tavern on route to the coast while Byrne’s inebriated funeral party was oblivious to the transgressions taking place.



The Giant’s body was swiftly taken back to London and delivered to John Hunter who was waiting at his house on Castle Street. Hunter himself then transported the gigantic corpse to his retreat in Earls Court. Hunter was terrified of retribution from Byrne’s friends and of being apprehended for what had transpired. The very night he received his coveted prize, he hastily chopped up the body of Charles Byrne and boiled the pieces in an immense copper vat until all that remained of the Irish Giant was his bones. He later reassembled the towering skeleton of Charles Byrne but wanting to escape public scrutiny, it was not put on display in his museum until four years had passed and the public’s interest in the story had waned.

**Portrait of John Hunter painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1787. The legs of the Irish Giant can be seen in the upper right hand corner.**





The skeleton of Charles Byrne as it appears today in the Hunterian Museum in London.

The imposing skeleton of Charles Byrne, the Irish Giant, can still be seen today in the Hunterian Museum in London where it remains one of the museum's top attractions. The peculiar brown discoloration of the bones can be attributed to John Hunter's sloppy technique that he employed in his haste. For once his passion as a collector outweighed his diligence as a scientist. Had John Hunter been at liberty to dissect the body of Charles Byrne, he might have discovered the cause of the giant's great stature. Inside the skull he would have observed a striking abnormality of the pituitary fossa. It wasn't until 1909 that the pioneering American Neurosurgeon Harvey Cushing was granted permission to open the Giant's skull and the diagnosis of a pituitary tumor was made.

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