John Hunter and the Irish giant

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There lived in England during the 18th century a swashbuckling individual whose experience was great and varied. In one lifetime he managed to teach himself anatomy and become a famous teacher of the subject; perform numerous experiments in physiology; write profusely on topics ranging from syphilology to "Opinions Concerning the Anatomy of the Camel's Stomach"; and establish and maintain a museum of natural history and pathology, much of which is still lovingly preserved after 200 years. Moreover, despite his humble birth, lack of culture, vituperative tongue (he squabbled with everybody including his illustrious pupil Jenner), and well-known dealings with such rascals as "resurrectionists" (or body-snatchers) he was appointed Surgeon Extraordinary to the King of England, and elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. He is remembered today by the museum that he founded, as an eponym in anatomy (Hunter's canal), and in annual memorial orations at the Royal College of Surgeons.

That such an impressive record of divers accomplishments should have been accumulated during one lifetime is truly remarkable and illustrates that this colourful man, remembered on his tombstone in Westminster Abbey as "The Founder of Scientific Surgery", was in fact more than a physician. He was a significant contributor to the evolution of scientific thought in general, and more delightfully, he was an egregious human being and a downright character. In fact it is reported that he used to wrestle a bull in order to keep fit, and that he once captured two escaped leopards single-handedly.

As a lad John Hunter showed little promise of becoming an important or thoughtful man. His sister Dorothea, when she was an old woman, recalled that "He was extremely indulged, and so humoursome that he would often, when a pretty big boy, sit for hours together crying when he could not get what he wanted; and could not be taught to read but with the greatest difficulty, and long after the age when other children read English fluently and have even made some progress in Latin".[1] Fortunately, he was eventually able to overcome his learning difficulty, and later became the author of a considerable body of scientific literature. Interestingly enough, though, he never completely outgrew his aversion to books. When once an acquaintance asked him what books his son should read in order to become a learned man, Hunter reportedly seized the poor fellow by the hand and dragged him into the dissecting room where, pointing at the corpses, Hunter exclaimed "These are my books!" In fact, the story of how John Hunter acquired one of these "books" is perhaps one of the most exciting episodes in a career that was far from dull.

Traditionally, one of the most serious impediments to the progress of scientific medicine was the limited availability of human bodies for proper anatomical dissection. Even in countries where such punitive arts as drawing and quartering of criminals flourished, the careful investigation of human morphology was generally forbidden by legal and moral restraints. Although the dissection of human bodies was not illegal in England during the 18th century, corpses for medical schools were in short supply. Occasionally the body of a hanged criminal was removed to Surgeon's Hall in London to be publicly "anatomized" in order to serve as an awful example and a further deterrent to crime,[2] such was the public horror of dissection. The shortage of bodies led many anatomy schools to use wax models cleverly constructed from rare and valuable preserved specimens. There were, however, a few persistent scientists like John Hunter and his elder brother William who would be satisfied with nothing less than the real thing, and since when there is a demand a supply usually appears, the peculiar institution of body-snatching arose and flourished.

The Jerry Crunchers* of England prospered, however, mainly because of a peculiar legal situation. With characteristic rationality the British laws had ruled that, since each man is the sole master of his body during life, when a man died nobody "owned" the dead corpse. That is, the owner had ceased to exist. It was therefore impossible to "steal" a corpse in the technical sense since it belonged to no one. Nor could it be kidnapped since it was not a living being. Therefore, as long as they did not take clothing, shrouds, coffin or anything else that belonged to the estate of the deceased, the resurrectionists were guilty of only a misdemeanour rather than a serious crime such as theft. For this reason body-snatching remained in essence a contest between the snatchers and the relatives of the dear departed.

Some looked upon this contest with good humour, as witnessed by Tom Hood's verse on "Mary's Ghost", who appears to her lover:

> The body-snatchers they have come,
> And made a snatch at me;
> It's very hard them kind of men
> Won't let a body be!
>
> The arm that used to take your arm
> Is gone to Doctor Vyse;
> And both my legs are gone to walk
> The hospital at Guys.
>
> I vow'd that you should have my hand
> But fate gives us denial;
> You'll find it there, at Doctor Bell's,
> In spirits and a phial.[3]

Officially, however, the public looked upon this morbid business with indignation and disgust. Tradition has it that once John and William Hunter refused to pay blackmail money to their suppliers, and that in retaliation the villains deposited a decomposing corpse on the front steps of their anatomy school during the night. In the morning two little girls first came upon the grisly sight and ran screaming

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*Jerry Cruncher, one of the characters in Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities", thought that there was a certain dignity in his work, and was pleased to consider himself to be a "resurrectionist".

home, whereupon the enraged neighbours pelted the windows of the school with rocks. But scientists could not be intimidated, and the body-snatchers were a lot not easily discouraged. Almost every scheme to prevent the removal of bodies, no matter how ingenious, was met by even more ingenious counterplots by the "sack-'em-up boys". When the corpse was placed in a sealed lead coffin, the robbers bribed the undertaker to leave the lid unlocked. When loaded guns with tripwires were set about the graveyard to discourage night raids, men dressed in women's clothes and posing as mourning widows would kneel among the tombstones during the day and surreptitiously cut the wires.

But perhaps the most magnificent example of scheme and counterscheme occurred following the death of one Charles Byrne (also known as O'Brien), who used to make a lucrative living as a one-man freak show, billing himself in the London newspapers thus:

> IRISH GIANT: To be seen this, and every day this week, in his large and elegant room, at the cane-shop, next door to Cox's Museum, Spring Gardens, Mr. Byrne, the surprising Irish Giant, who is allowed to be the tallest man in the world .... Hours of admittance every day, Sundays excepted, from 11 to 3 and from 5 to 8, at half a crown each person.[4]

To be precise, Mr. Byrne stood eight feet, two inches tall in his stocking feet. Unfortunately this Goliath was by no means as robust as he was huge. He was a confirmed alcoholic and he also suffered from mental deficiency and tuberculosis, which inexorably sapped his strength. Of course, the representatives of several schools of anatomy hovered greedily near like so many vultures, and of all those who paid half a crown to see the giant we may be sure that none was more interested than John Hunter who by this time was building up a considerable museum of specimens, both animal and human. Through a disreputable fellow called Howieson, Hunter made a monetary offer to the sodden colossus for his body (payment in advance, of course!) at which proposal poor Byrne recoiled in horror. But Hunter would not be thwarted in his purpose. At his instigation Howieson went to stare at the giant every day with a baleful expression on his face that clearly lamented "Sooner or later . . .".[5] The unfortunate giant was considerably unnerved by this merciless persecution and was at length driven to abandon his career as a walking exhibition. He hit the bottle harder than ever and, determined that he should not be "anatomized" when dead, Byrne ordered arrangements to be made that would keep his corpse from the clutches of the resurrectionists. Because he was convinced that death was near he ordered a lead coffin to be built and left firm directions that it be watched day and night by stalwart Irish friends until it could be disposed of in the mouth of the River Thames, far beyond the reach of the surgeons.

No doubt Byrne's worries about the ultimate fate of his earthly remains contributed to the effects of gin and tuberculosis to hasten somewhat his untimely demise, and on the day when the lugubrious rites were to be carried out the following news item appeared in a London paper:

> 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-snatchers, 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.[6]

It is noteworthy that carefully planned and premeditated body-snatching received prior publicity in a newspaper, where the story was written up much like a pregame prediction for a sporting event! It appears that at least one of the diving bells was constructed by an ambitious group of medical students who wished to make a little surprise presentation to the anatomy museum of their school.[7]

What precisely happened is not known since no primary sources have ever been found. However, it is certain that the ambitious medical students did not recover the hulk of the Irish giant. For three years nobody knew what had actually become of the body of Charles Byrne, although most people were satisfied that it had been safely deposited at the bottom of the sea. Then, when public interest in the matter had entirely died away, the skeleton of an extraordinarily tall person appeared one day in a splendid new glass case in John Hunter's museum. Most authors point out that Hunter never made any written mention of either giants or gigantism.[8] However, he once did confide in a letter to his close friend, Sir Joseph Banks, "I lately got a tall man, but at the time could make no particular observations. I hope next summer to be able to show him."[9]

Almost certainly John Hunter had somehow been able to bribe the Irish body-watchers. What they had buried at sea was probably an empty coffin. Tradition has it that John Hunter paid them £500, a considerable sum in those days, to deliver the body.[10] While there is absolutely no documentary proof for the story, John Kobler has written a perfectly believable account of what easily might have happened:

> When Byrne finally died, the watchers stripped the corpse, so that if caught, they could not be charged with stealing property. They nailed shut the empty casket and lugged the body down the stairs. John was waiting in his coach, and Howieson was perched on the driver's seat. Money and corpse swiftly changed hands. Then clattering through the stilled streets the coach sped straight on under the lightening sky to Earl's Court, the tense little surgeon, and the huge naked cadaver jouncing together in the cramped blackness of the rear seat.[11]

It probably would not have been of much consolation to the Irish giant to have known that he would not really be "anatomized" after all, but so great was Hunter's fear of being apprehended that the very night he obtained the corpse he boiled all the flesh off the bones, leaving only the skeleton which he hid in his basement. The skeleton, incidentally, may still be seen today in the Hunterian Museum in London. The peculiar brown discolouration of the bones is due to the sloppy technique that Hunter employed in his haste. Had he been at liberty to dissect the body of Charles Byrne, Hunter might have discovered the cause of the giant's deformity. Inside the skull he would have seen a striking abnormality of the pituitary fossa which was not observed until 1909 when Harvey Cushing obtained permission to open the skull. Cushing then made the diagnosis of pituitary tumour.[12]

In 1787 John Hunter commissioned the well-known artist Sir Joshua Reynolds to paint his portrait.[13] In the upper right-hand corner of the picture one can see the bony legs of what must have been a very long skeleton. John Hunter has a positively cherubic expression on his face, a look of complete candidness and innocence, almost as if he were saying "Who, me?".

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