

The Patagonian giants

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

It was 21 December 1764, the longest day of the year. Aboard HMS Dolphin, Commodore John Byron, RN, grandfather of the poet, was sailing south along the coast of Patagonia.

Finding a suitable anchorage, he ordered out the ship's boat. As he landed, he saw a crowd of about five hundred people approaching, and went forward alone to meet them in peace. Most of them were on horseback, waving. "One of them, who afterwards appeared to be a Chief, came towards me: he was of a gigantic stature, and seemed to realise the tales of monsters in human shape: he had the skin of some wild beast thrown over his shoulders, as a Scotch Highlander wears his plaid, and was painted so as to make the most hideous appearance I ever beheld: round one eye was a large circle of white, a circle of black surrounded the other, and the rest of his face was streaked with paint of different colours; I did not measure him, but if I may judge of his height by the proportion of his stature to my own, it could not be much less than seven feet."

So the controversy of the Patagonian giants was born. It exploded in the newspapers when Byron and his men came home to tell the tale. A snobbish scribbler called Horace Walpole wrote: "Oh, but we have discovered a race of giants! Captain Byron has found a nation of Brobdignags on the coast of Patagonia; the inhabitants on foot taller than he and his men on horseback. I don't indeed know how he and his sailors came to be riding in the South Seas. However, it is a terrible blow to the Irish, for I suppose all our dowagers now will be for marrying Patagonians."

Why should it be of interest to us here? Well, firstly, when seeking the origin of the word "penguin" I couldn't help noticing that early navigators in those waters kept coming across people whom they described as "enormous". Secondly, the row rumbled on in tandem with the one over the authenticity of James Macpherson's "translations" of Ossian, which were best-sellers in 1760, 1762 and 1763 and took Europe by storm. It was assumed that if the Highland warriors Ossian and Fingal were historical characters from the 2nd century AD, as Macpherson claimed, they must have resembled Byron's Patagonian giants. Thirdly, when the row exploded again in 1773 with the publication of the book of the voyage, Johnson and Boswell were visiting the Western Isles – and it adds a little extra colour to their accounts of the tour.

In fact, it's curious that whether the subject is Patagonia or the Western Isles, the cast of characters in those days seems to be the same. Hard on Walpole's heels, in 1771, came the Welshman Thomas Pennant. He was in between a trip to the Highlands and a trip to the Islands, both of which resulted in important books, and he was writing to Daines Barrington, who did much the same for Cornwall. These people were the anthropologists of their day, though the term hadn't been invented yet.

Pennant was no controversialist. Unlike Walpole and Johnson, he kept his head. When Johnson was told at Corrie near Broadford that Pennant, who was there the previous year, had been presented with "a curious specimen of Highland antiquity", he snapped, "Sir, it was more than he deserved: the dog is a Whig."

Johnson didn't know Pennant personally but had read his books, so this was a literary rather than a political judgment, meaning that Pennant was a machine and lacked a soul. Pennant waited fifteen years, then, in "Of London", made his reply: "I should have been a Whig at the Revolution. There have been periods since, in which I should have been, what I now am, a moderate Tory; a supporter, as far as my little influence extends, of a well-poised balance between the crown and people: but, should the scale preponderate against the *Salus populi*, that moment may it be said, *The dog's a Whig!*"

Writing to Barrington, Pennant reported an interview with an elderly Jesuit called Falkener who had spent 38 years amongst the Indians of Patagonia. First, however, he patiently documented "the several evidences that will tend to prove the existence of a people of a supernatural height". These range from 1519 to 1704 and are of three kinds: living men, dead men and footsteps. The height of living men was variously reported as about seven feet French (more than seven feet English), three ells (up to 11 feet), 15 or 16 spans (up to 12 feet), and 10 or 11 feet. And 18-inch footsteps were spotted in 1586 and 1642.

In 1591 Anthony Knevet measured the bodies of two men recently buried, finding them to be 14 spans long (10ft 6ins). And in 1615 we hear of 10- or 11-foot skeletons. But Pennant points out that "as it was not the fortune of the four other voyagers, who sailed through the streights in the 17th century, to fall in with any of this tall race, it became a fashion to treat as fabulous the account of the preceding nine, and to hold this lofty race as the mere creation of a warm imagination".

Pennant obviously liked Falkener, but comments revealingly that "he seems to have lost all European guile, and to have acquired all the simplicity, and honest impetuosity, of the people he has been so long conversant with". This is evident when he tells Pennant that Patagonians formerly existed who were taller than anything mentioned so far, "for skeletons are often found of far greater dimensions, particularly about the river Texeira".

To explain this, let me summarise what he says about a famously tall tribe called the Puelches. They believe that after death they go across the sea to a country where they will forever be doing the two things they enjoy most – hunting ostriches, and getting drunk on the liquor of a hot sweet fruit called the chucha.

When an important person of the Puelches dies, a respectable woman disposes of the intestines, then scrapes as much flesh off the bones as possible, and buries them. After a year she digs them up again. "If any of the bones drop out of their places they are refixed and tied together, and the whole formed into a perfect skeleton. Thus complete, it is packed up in a hide, put on the back of a favourite horse of the deceased, and then translated to the tomb of his ancestor, perhaps 300 miles distant, and always within a small space from the sea.

"The skeleton is then taken out, and, decked in its best robes, and adorned with plumes and beads, is placed sitting in a deep square pit, parallel with those buried before, with sword, lance, and other weapons placed by them; and the skins of their horses, stuffed, and supported by stakes, also accompany them. The top of the pit is then covered with turf, placed on transverse beams. A matron is appointed to attend these sepulchres, whose office it is to keep the skeletons clean, and to new-clothe them annually."

This resembles the burial of our own noble Celtic ancestors, who took with them their grave-goods, their chariots and their wine. More to the point, with all this transporting and rearranging, it would be easy for the skeletons to grow a little bigger each time, especially if it helped the warrior in his eternal ostrich-hunt and his supernatural brawls. When placing the skeleton in its pit, the Puelches would pour chucha over it and drink a toast: "Long live the dead!"

The book published in 1773 was meant, above all, to sell. It was written not by Byron but by Dr John Hawkesworth, and was entitled: "An Account of the Voyages . . . for making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere . . . drawn up from the Journals which were kept by the several Commanders". Let me give you the flavour. Byron, or rather Hawkesworth, calls the seven-foot chieftain "a frightful colossus". The men in general were not merely tall, but broad in proportion, and the women were big too. "I perceived among them one woman who had bracelets either of brass, or very

pale gold, upon her arms, and some beads of blue glass, strung upon two long queues of hair, which being parted at the top, hung down over each shoulder before her: she was of a most enormous size, and her face was, if possible, more frightfully painted than the rest . . .

“Mr Cumming came up with the tobacco, and I could not but smile at the astonishment which I saw expressed in his countenance, upon perceiving himself, though six feet two inches high, become at once a pigmy among giants; for these people may indeed more properly be called giants than tall men.”

The press had demanded to know if “a race of giants” had been discovered, and Byron let Hawkesworth come perilously close to giving them what they wanted. Note the tortured prose. “A man who should measure only six feet two inches, and equally exceed a stout well-set man of the common stature in breadth and muscle, would strike us rather as being of a gigantic race, than as an individual accidentally anomalous; our sensations therefore, upon seeing five hundred people, the shortest of whom were at least four inches taller, and bulky in proportion, may easily be imagined.”

Byron’s entry in the “Dictionary of National Biography” claims that Hawkesworth “greatly exaggerated the size of these natives, and this led to much levity at Byron’s expense”. Boswell noted that at a dinner in Edinburgh, “*Fingal* being talked of, Dr Johnson, who used to boast that he had, from the first, resisted both Ossian and the Giants of Patagonia, averred his positive disbelief of its authenticity”. And when Johnson published his own “Journey to the Western Islands” he stated sarcastically: “This is the age in which those who could not read, have been supposed to write; in which the giants of antiquated romance have been exhibited as realities. If we know little of the ancient Highlanders, let us not fill the vacuity with *Ossian*. If we have not searched the *Magellanick* regions, let us however forbear to people them with *Patagons*.”

It was part of the great debate of the day. Was society getting better or worse? If worse, was God looking after us? Johnson’s opponent Lord Monboddo, who guessed what Darwin later proved, found confirmation in Byron’s account that modern Europeans were a puny caricature of natural man. He had worked out from the *Iliad* that Achilles was 14 feet tall, and it made sense to him that a less perfect people like the Patagonians should be only eight feet tall.

So the question came down to: an individual can be gigantic, but can a race? For example, Angus MacAskill (1825–63) was a well-attested 7ft 9ins tall, but any other native of Berneray I have ever met was of normal height. This was the line taken by Falkener, and in his own “Description of Patagonia” (1774) he spoke of the great Cacique Cangapol who lived at Huichin on the Rio Negro. “This Chief, who was called by the Spaniards the Cacique Bravo, was tall and well-proportioned. He must have been seven feet and some inches in height; because, on tiptoe, I could not reach to the top of his head. I was very well acquainted with him, and went some journeys in his company.

“I do not recollect ever to have seen an Indian that was above an inch or two taller than Cangapol. His brother Sausimian was but about six feet high. The Patagonians, or Puelches, are a large bodied people; but I never heard of that gigantic race, which others have mentioned, though I have seen persons of all the different tribes of southern Indians.”

There was furious argument among sailors too. De Bougainville found a tribe at the same place where Byron had landed. They were tall but not gigantic – between 5ft 5ins and 5ft 10ins French, i.e. between 5ft 10ins and 6ft 3ins English – and they had knives which Byron had given them, so they must be the same people! But Byron denied giving out knives.

The explanation, as Pennant quietly pointed out, was that Patagonians were nomads. They followed the ostriches, and travelled hundreds of miles to a funeral. They ate only animal food, so they were tall, and they had a cult of height, so that the tallest men were chiefs. Pennant suggests the existence of classes as well as tribes, including a Brahman type (my word, not his) who were exclusively tall, and bred for the purpose. That sounds like a good explanation, and I can only add that the Celts had castes too.

Byron had been insulted, but his men backed him up, so Pennant gave him the last word, publishing a letter from him in his “Literary Life” of 1793, seven years after his death. “They were certainly of a most amazing size: so much were their horses disproportioned, that all the people that were with me in the boats, when very near the shore, swore that they were all mounted upon deer; and to this instant I believe there is not a man that landed with me, though they were at some distance from them, but would swear they took them to be nine feet high. I do suppose many of them were between seven and eight, and strong in proportion.”

29 March 2007