

Into the Headlines_ Episode 1: The Irish Giant

Speaker 1: (00:02) Let's be honest, most of us do this – see something interesting on our news feed, give the headline a quick scan, read a couple of paragraphs, skip to the comments and then move on pretty quickly. In this podcast series from the University of Aberdeen, I want to explore the stories making the news in more depth and ask the people involved what it means in a wider context. And I want you to come with me. I'm Laura Grant and this is Into the Headlines.

Intro music: (00:23)

Speaker 1: (00:39) Episode one. The Irish Giant. Today I'm joined by Dr Thomas Muinzer, senior lecturer at the University of Aberdeen School of Law, and Neil Curtis, head of Museums and Special Collections at the University. Welcome both.

Speaker 2: (00:53) Glad to be with you.

Speaker 1: (00:55) I'm going to start with you Thomas as a campaign you've been involved in for a good many years has been in the headlines recently and that's the story of Charles Byrne, or the 'Irish Giant' as he called himself. Born in 1761, due to a growth disorder before he rose both in stature – reaching a height of 7ft 7 in - and fame before dying at the age of just 22. Since then his remains have been on display at the Hunterian Museum in London. That is until recently, when they were removed in response to the efforts of campaigners such as yourself. What can you tell us about who Charles Byrne was and how his skeleton ended up on display to the public in the first place?

Speaker 2: (01:34) Yes, as you pointed out Laura, Charles Byrne was an eighteenth century celebrity Irish giant. So he was born quite a long time ago and he had what we would understand to be a medical ailment with his pituitary gland which sits at the base of the brain and helps regulate our height. So he ended up with the condition gigantism and he shot up to this prodigious height, and as you pointed out he was around 7ft 7in based on skeletal studies but he worked as showman and exhibited himself as a human curiosity and as part of that we know from old advertisements and accounts of Charles that he exaggerated his height somewhat he was considered sometimes to be 8ft or 8ft 4in and it was at a time when the national height average was a lot lower than it is today. And from a young age, as his height began to increase, he eventually hit on a notion to go off and seek fame and adventure with a friend of his called Joe Vance. He left his home in what is present day Northern Ireland, or Ireland back then, he goes to Scotland first and works his way down to London exhibiting himself as a human curiosity and he soon becomes a celebrity. The newspapers are fascinated by him, the public are paying to go and see him and he builds up quite a substantial amount of money but tragically one night, he's having a few pints in a pub called The Black Horse in the Charring Cross area, and poor Charles is pickpocketed and he had his money compressed into a sort of bank note or bond note, back then of course they didn't have bank machines and all the sorts of things we have today, that was stolen sadly and he lost his worldly fortune basically in that theft and he went into a depression, went to bed and a couple of months later he was dead. Those difficult circumstances will have exacerbated that and also his low immunity and his medical condition will have played a part, and there are some accounts suggesting he may have contracted tuberculosis as well.

Speaker 1: (03:45) And what happened after his death?

Speaker 2: (03.47) When he passed away in 1783 it was well known that the surgical community were keen to get a hold of his corpse to study it and dissect it. Charles was terrified of this so he said to his pals shortly before he died, look, weigh my coffin down and bury it at sea because even if he's buried in the ground resurrectionists or gravediggers could easily have dug it up and sold it to the surgical community on the black market, which was quite rife at the time, this black market for cadavers, so Charles' pals arranged for the funeral. He was taken to Margate on the English coast and buried there, it was thought, but that wasn't quite what happened. As the funereal train stopped for a night to rest up and have a bite to eat and what not, a crooked person in their party who was in the pay of eminent surgeon John Hunter, was able to secretly switch the body for dead weight, so when the burial took place, and its reported on in the old newspapers of the day, Charles' remains were not in that coffin. They were transported to Holburn, secretly, in a hay cart, and they arrived at the home of John Hunter, and Hunter reduced the corpse to its skeleton and then the famous surgeon packed the skeleton away and four years later he revealed this new exhibit in his anatomical collection and when we fast forward to today, we have a memorial museum to John Hunter in the Royal College of Surgeons in London and Charles Byrne's remains have been a centrepiece of that memorial museum as part of his specimen collection so there's a very rich kind of story behind this.

Speaker 1: (05.27) It's a rich story but it's also a very sad story. He didn't want this to happen. How did your interest in it come about?

Speaker 2: (05.32) I entirely agree, it's a very sad story. I was a law student some years ago sleeping through, to be frank a rather tedious class on property law and I had to go write an essay and I noticed in a source when I was reading a particular source for this course a mention of, words to this effect, a one-time remembered celebrity Irish giant whose remains were stolen on the way to its funeral, or something like that. And I was studying in Northern Ireland, I am Northern Irish, and it just caught my interest, this note was querying some technical legal issue relating to Charles Bryne and I got fascinated by Bryne and his story and as you know if you want to learn more about someone interesting from history you tend to lift down a biography, and there was no biography on Charles Bryne. He'd been a great celebrity in his day but he was largely now forgotten. So I started to piece together his life a little bit, I became more and more interested and I gradually wrote my research up in a couple of papers, one in 2013 called 'A Grave Situation' and a couple of others and I just became fascinated by the man and his life and I could see very clearly that a great wrong had been done to his memory and it was inappropriate for his remains to be on display in the memorial museum so that galvanised my fascination and on I went from there.

Speaker 1: (06.57) Yes, so the campaign was born and it's obviously had support from lots of different quarters, including Wolf Hall author Dame Hilary Mantel who also wrote *The Giant O'Brien*, a fictionalised account which draws on Burns' story. What is the key issue at the heart of the calls requesting the museum take the remains off public display, what's at the core of this?

Speaker 2: (07.16) The issue at the core is the tragic treatment of Byrne's posthumous memory, we maybe can't say of the treatment of Byrne because he has passed away but his posthumous memory, respect for the man that was and so forth by putting his skeleton on display as a curiosity object in the memorial museum to the man who was responsible for contributing to the pain and terror in which he died and then the mistreatment of the remains subsequently. There are many good things that can be said about John Hunter, he was a very eminent surgeon, but this is not one of them. It is a stain on his record as a historical figure as well.

Speaker 1: (07:55) And this is relevant to people today isn't it?

Speaker 2: (07:58) When it comes to burial, in some sense we're not just dealing with some story from a couple of hundred years ago that may sound interesting and tragic but isn't relevant to us. There's a personal relevance to all of us, burial wishes are not legally binding under UK law and they typically haven't really needed to be in so far as the living tend to respect the wishes of the dead. So you and I, and all of us, we are relying on precisely what Charles Byrne was relying on when it comes to burial and our remains. Are people going to respect our wishes and treat our posthumous memory and remains respectfully, or are people just going to overlook those and treat them in ways, especially in this case, that go against the grain of our commonly shared morality?

Speaker 1: (08:44) I think I'm right in saying that this was the Museum's probably most famous exhibit and no doubt thousands of people will have viewed it over the years. Some I would imagine out of a sense of the macabre but, given this was a collection of anatomical specimens linked to the Royal College of Surgeons, for many others there will have been a genuine interest in science and the human body. Where for you is the line between education and public interest when it comes to collections like this?

Speaker 2: (09:11) Education is generally very important of course when it comes to museums and certainly public interest is certainly key but in the case of this narrow exhibit again we contextualise the exhibition against the backdrop of the context that we have. And I should say that if you look at old news accounts in the newspapers of the day when Charles was dying, there were rather chilling accounts of the surgical community, or representatives of its members sort of hanging around and keeping an eye on his area so that once he dies they can swoop in and try to procure the corpse, trying to bribe people and so forth. So these sort of gothic or macabre write ups in the old newspapers of the day, I quote several in *A Grave Situation* if you'd like to go to the source. In terms of the medical value of the specimen like Byrne's skeleton, medical researchers have taken DNA from his teeth and set out the DNA record for us so Byrne has been of medical value in death but given that we now have these full medical studies we have people who will come forward under the principal of informed consent with the same condition and so forth, there is no discernible medical value to the retention of Byrne's skeleton. I should point out as well it is possible to construct an exact replica of the skeleton and display that and provide a respectful burial to the remains. I don't think that's an appropriate course but that is still possible if it comes to the display issue. So we draw a line around those sorts of parameters and what follows from that if we don't have further medical value is again this momentum towards the correct outcome which is to respect the man that was, his memory and to arrange a respectful burial of those remains.

Speaker 1: (11:00) So your campaign continues?

Speaker 2: (11:02) Yes indeed. It's been very positive that the Hunterian Museum have announced that when they reopen in March of this year it will be with the remains of Charles Byrne removed from display. Campaigners, myself and others, are hoping that the trustees will now take the next step which would be to arrange a respectful burial. There are a couple of schools of thought on which type of burial might be most appropriate. Since the whole *raison d'être* or purpose is to respect and carry out Byrne's wishes it seems obvious that one would undertake a sea burial, a respectful sea burial, because that's what he asked for. Although if you take a purposive approach where you look at the purpose of his wishes, we know they were to evade the resurrectionists, these bodysnatchers that might dig the

remains up and the surgical community purchasing the remains on the black market, now we don't need to worry about those problems in current day so it could be that if you look at the broader purpose which was to secure a safe, respectful burial, you could argue that perhaps a more conventional burial might be suitable. There is, well there was, a very interesting site in Charles' townland called the giant's grave and it was said that Charles had lain down there when he was young and he was growing and growing and he had lain down and had his outline dug around to measure the height, probably for a bit of fun with his pals in the local area, and that site was maintained as part of a local site of interest and when I first went out to where Charles had lived, it's a town called Drumullan in present day but it was called Littlebridge back then, I met a lot of older members from the community who used to go to that site which was known colloquially as the giant's grave after Charles and you would learn about Byrne when you were a young kid there and play at the, in inverted commas, grave site and it was said that this was where he would like to be buried so I think there's a good case for a respectful burial on land and or as close as possible to that site. There is a National Trust site called Springhill House which is a Downton Abbey type stately home in the area that was there in Charles' time, Charles used to hang out there a bit, they used to invite him to dinners and things to dazzle people with his height and his kind of wit and all of that, so I think I hear soundings that the National Trust would be amenable to a burial on those grounds and a respectful plaque perhaps or a little memorial so that would be an option. Just briefly, the giant's grave is not there any more, it was dug up by a farmer who took over the land for grazing. It was dug up about thirty to forty year ago but I did get a visit to the site from some locals who used to play there as children when they were young so that might perhaps be another suitable option for a respectful burial.

Speaker 1: (13.52) Neil, I'm going to draw you in here because, while not quite in the same arena but certainly related in many ways, the University has been involved in a number of repatriations of over the past 20 years, including the very high profile return of a Benin Bronze in 2021. What are the Bronzes and how did the University come to have this one in its collection in the first place?

Speaker 3: (14.14) The Benin Bronze that the University returned was one that had been looted by a British Force in 1897 from Benin City, from the Royal Palace of the Oba of Benin. They were records of the history of the Kingdom of Benin, they were on alters, they were sacred, they were incredibly important. The University bought it at auction so, in some ways the University's legal title was based on that purchase, so we were thinking more about the ethics and the morality of how it was originally acquired, that there wasn't a straightforward edict on the University on what to do but we did want to think what is the right thing to do today and, given the circumstances were so clearly looting, the University decided it should be returned and it is now back in the Court of the Oba in Benin City.

Speaker 1: (15.06) Clearly a very culturally significant item, was returning it a simple process?

Speaker 3: (15.13) In some ways it's not simple in so much as it took about 125 years for it to get back again and it's something that is in the news a lot today. For the University I think we have a procedure, it has a sort of step by step approach, we have various criteria. We try to have it in a consensual way so the people who are making the proposal they are also part of the discussion, so we think about the history of it, we think about the significance to the University and the significance to whoever we are thinking of returning to, we think about issues, a bit like the ones we've just been hearing about, about making a replica and display and research and so on, so it's not simple in as much as it's just about saying yes no, it's something you want to think through very carefully and I think it's very important we do think

through very carefully because if items are of that importance they deserve to be taken seriously and so that's what that procedure does. It's based on the idea of the University having either legal title, hence being able to return, or in the case of human remains having certain rights of possession that again mean we're the appropriate organisation to be able to make that decision but I'm much happier and so far it has always happened that it's been a consensual discussion, that it's not actually been an either or, it's something that we've worked through together.

Speaker 1: (16:33) Aberdeen isn't the only University of institution looking at this. Many counties, not just the UK, have long and often challenging histories to contend with and there is an obligation to address the legacies of slavery and empire – and the 'in inverted commas' ownership of historic collections. The return of the Benin Bronze by the University has been followed by similar moves by other institutions - why do you think this is gaining traction now and what does it mean for museums and the role they play in knowledge-sharing and education?

Speaker 3: (17:10) I think there are many things all have come together. There has been a long term shift in what museums think they are for from being simply sort of treasure houses where museums keep things and they are primarily for scholars, to thinking much more about them being for the public, that it's for the public good, and thinking therefore about all the different reasons that people might want to visit and want to engage with collections. So there's been a lot of work over the past couple of generations trying to understand how people and objects and human remains relate and understanding how some of the emotional power as well as just the scholarly value. So that's been a long term change. I think in parallel with that museums have been looked at quite critically from the outside, and particularly by indigenous people in North America, Australia and New Zealand where human remains were stolen, often for display and for study for racial types, so there was a very overt racist background to the creation of collections and sometimes human remains were acquired along with cultural material in dreadful ways, and that's been critiqued and there's been a move to have ancestors reburied, to have sacred items returned, and then more recently we've seen, particularly following the murder of George Floyd, a greater focus on the rest of the world and how it's been colonised by European powers and so thinking about that relationship as well so it's been a number of things that have come together, it's not just at museums, a lot of this is coming from museums and I think most people working in museums are now very comfortable taking part in these debates and these discussions and thinking very openly about what do we do with all these legacies, it's not simple and there are lots of different viewpoints, how do you navigate through that.

Speaker 1: (19:03) Thomas, from your experience with the Charles Byrne case, where does the law come into this and is that also changing, is there going to be something different coming down the line given how the landscape for museums is changing and these conversations are taking place?

Speaker 2: (19:20) The law's role is very interesting in this. If you look at the Charles Byrne case narrowly you tend to find that say for example if you are a campaigner and you'd like to compel the release of the remains there don't seem to be any credible legal avenues, at least that I can detect and some other colleagues, that would allow you to do that so in terms of the law as it related to Byrne directly, the trustees of the Hunterian Museum they do have legitimate custody of the remains and they can decide to divest themselves of the remains or otherwise but rather than looking for a legal solution here it seems clear that we are looking for a moral solution so were making a moral case rather than a legal one.

Speaker 1: (20:00) Neil you also sit on the Ethics Committee of the Museums Association – how do you approach cases like this from an ethics perspective?

Speaker 3: (20:09) The Museums Association has a code of ethics that we all work with and it considers areas like caring for the collection, working with people and forms of institutional governance and at an international level, the International Council of Museums also has a code of ethics and they are consistent so often museums operate a code of ethics themselves, rarely do cases come to the ethics committee for consideration but I think what's really important when we're trying to think ethically is understanding that there are different viewpoints and so a good ethical discussion is often one where you bring different viewpoints and that's really a powerful case when you are thinking about some of the items in collections where we might think of it as an object, as property, whereas to someone else this may be a sacred item and it's a very different way of thinking about it. And then whether you are thinking about people who have a scientific interest in seeing something or an approach which some of us might not be comfortable with but none the less they still have that and we might call it a morbid fascination but I think we have to accept that some people might have that view so trying to have a discussion that looks at all the different possibilities and aims not necessarily for what is absolutely the right thing to do we probably can't do that but is trying to have a conversation at least about what's the best thing we can do with all the evidence we have. So that's where the University's approach to, certainly to repatriation, takers that sort of approach. With the Benin Bronze the suggestion came from within the University, from ourselves, that this is something that we felt was wrong for us to have and that then led to us having a discussion with people in Nigeria about who were the right people to take custody of it now. So that richness of an ethical discussion I think it really important, as I say it gives that respect to what we've talking about as well. It means we can also be responsive, we can be proactive. It's open.

Speaker 1: (22:10) And what about when it come to Byrnes specifically?

Speaker 3: (22:15) Thinking about ethical guidance there's one particular code that's useful, this was the World Archaeological Congress' Vermillion Accord and it's interesting the way it structures a conversation. So it says that you should have respect for the mortal remains of the dead, which is a very general statement. It then specifically says respect for the wishes of the dead, you know, where you know them or where they can be inferred should, wherever possible, be followed. Then there's respect for the wishes of the local community, and respect for the scientific research value and I think that quite nicely shows that there is different, sometimes competing sometimes not, approaches that need to be balanced and need to be thought of but I do think in this particular case it's quite striking that Byrne's wishes were very clearly stated and are known so that, in an ethical discussion, using that framework I think the outcome would be very clear.

Speaker 2: (23:09) Just to underscore a comment Neil was making about human bodies and artefacts and how they can differ in terms of legal perception. We're used to distinguishing between property and people so in the case of Byrne's remains we would tend to see those remains as being in the custody or possession of the Hunterian trustees, we're less inclined to think of ownership because we're dealing with the remains of an actual person or human being. Technically in law they can actually be subject to limited ownership entitlements but generally, and as Neil points out, we have this division between people and things, and part of that goes to the respect that we accord the deceased and human remains which is a very special kind of respect based on our shared humanity.

Speaker 1: (23:55) Well, look, I'm sorry to say it cause this is a fascinating subject and I think we could keep talking for hours but I'm afraid we've run out of time.

Thank you both for being part of this discussion, it's been dark but great. And thanks also to our listeners, I hope you've enjoyed today's look into the headlines. I'll be back to explore more tales from the University of Aberdeen with you very soon but if you just can't wait, please do visit [abdn.ac.uk slash news](http://abdn.ac.uk/news) and you'll find all the latest stories and announcements.

Outro music