A short-lived Irish infant giant

OC WARD and C WARD*

On 1 March 1861 the following notice appeared in the *Irish Times*:

WONDER OF WONDERS: THE IRISH INFANT GIANT WILL BE EXHIBITED AT THE CONCERT-ROOM, ROTUNDO, for a few days commencing on THURSDAY, MARCH 7th from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. Admission one shilling. Juvenile members of families and schools half-price.

This remarkable Child, son of Hugh and Mary Reid of the County of Monaghan, is now 14 months old and presents the most Extraordinary Phenomenon ever exhibited in human form. It has already attained the astonishing weight of nearly five stone, is about three feet in height, measures 32 inches around the chest, is well-proportioned, remarkably intelligent, and exceedingly prepossessing in appearance.

NB - Medical Gentlemen and Gentlemen connected with the Press of Dublin, are respectfully invited to meet at the above-named Room on WEDNESDAY NEXT, March 6th, between the hours of Two and Five p.m., to witness this Astonishing Freak of Nature, previous to its Public Exhibition.

CHARLES BAUER, Agent

It was commonplace at the time in question for cases described as medical curiosities to be exhibited to the public on payment of admission fees. The role of Charles Bauer has been examined. He did not act as agent for any similar exhibition at any time. His name has not emerged in any other Dublin or Monaghan setting and his connection with Thomas Reid appears to have been a one-off venture. The probability is that he had to cope with the fact that the Reid family, later noted to be of indigent social background, did not speak English fluently, the parish of Donagh being predominantly Irish-speaking at that time.

On 13 March, the following anonymous letter was published in the *Irish Times*, the writer giving the Provincial Hotel, Usher’s-quay, as his address. The letter read:

Sir,

Having paid a visit to the “Infant Giant” on exhibition at the Rotundo I venture to suggest that some authenticity as to his real age should be

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afforded to the public. It seems difficult to believe, upon the mere statement of those in attendance, that a child of his extraordinary size and weight should be but fourteen months old. Certainly, if this be the fact, he is, without exception, “the most wonderful child in the world,” but those who pay to see him have a right to know something of his history. Can you afford your numerous readers any information upon the subject.- I am, sir, your obedient servant,

CURIOSITY.

This letter raises a question: who was Curiosity? It was probably Dr. Henry Maunsell. He wrote from the Provincial Hotel, Usher’s Quay. This was also the publishing address of the *Dublin Evening Herald*, a newspaper which he had recently bought out. He was a well-informed commentator, having co-authored a relevant textbook which went into a fifth edition.¹ He would certainly have been aware that there had not been any reports on infant giants in the mainstream medical journals.

His letter was answered on the following day. The letter was published under the name of Hugh Reid, the infant’s father. It was published from an address at 14 North Frederick Street in Dublin, a lodging house. Presumably it was written by Charles Bauer. Hugh Reid’s name does not appear in local rent books in Monaghan and at the time of his marriage no townland in Donagh was entered in his address, suggesting that he may have been of no fixed abode. The letter read:

Sir,

I noticed among the correspondence in your paper this morning a letter signed “Curiosity,” stating that the public require evidence that my child, now exhibiting as the Infant Giant, is not more than fourteen months old. Now, sir, it seems to me that a momentary sight of the child should convince everyone, notwithstanding its enormous size, of the facts as stated by myself and wife, but if this be not sufficient, and the public desire it, we are both willing to be sworn, that the statements made by us are correct - viz., that our son, Thomas Reid, was born on the 17th day of December, 1859, and christened the following day by Rev. Patrick Moynagh, P.P., an extract of whose certificate to that effect is copied below.

I beg further to state, that our child, said Thomas, was of ordinary size at the time of birth, and manifested no unusual rapidity of growth until six weeks old.

He still takes the natural food for infants, and does not appear to possess a remarkable appetite. - I am, sir, your obedient servant,

HUGH REID.

Copy of extract from the baptismal registry of the parish of Donagh: -
December 18th 1859 - Baptised Thomas, son of Hugh and Mary Reid, and Mary McCarron. Sponsors - Patrick and Anne Reid.

PATRICK MOYNAGH, P.P.

The above is a true copy.

JAMES KELLY, P.P.

This information has been confirmed by Theo McMahon, archivist Diocese of Clogher. Responding on 28 August 2009, he wrote:

I have examined the Donagh register of marriages and baptisms for the period 1850-60. I found the marriage of Hugh and Mary recorded briefly as follows in basic Latin: banns dispensed nine January 1859 married Hugh Reid and Mary McCarron both of Donagh parish.

I can find only one child born to this union listed as follows: Baptised 18 December 1 859. Thomas Reid son of Hugh Reid and Mary McCarron of Donagh parish. The sponsors were Patrick and Anne Reid. No townland is listed and the officiating priest seems to have been Rev Moyna gh.

I have examined all the other Reid baptismal entries for the 1850-1860 period but no other child was found named Thomas.

A review of contemporary Irish newspapers was conducted and no trace was found of any subsequent exhibition of the infant giant apart from one. The Louth Examiner reported on 16 May 1861 as follows:

The infant giant from Monaghan was exhibited in the Dundalk market house on Friday, Saturday and Monday last. This extraordinary child is only six months old and is as long as an ordinary one of 10 years: in height he is about 3'6" and he weighs between seven and eight stone, well proportioned and intelligent looking and with a well developed head. The most remarkable thing about this infant phenomenon is that he is larger than the average born until his fifth month and is, we believe, the largest infant of his years in the United Kingdom. The parents are persons in low circumstances.

The visit to Dundalk may have been part of a planned tour of the United Kingdom. Belfast was easily accessible from Dundalk. Travelling by ferry from Belfast to Liverpool might have brought the family to the mainland but it has not been possible to find any evidence that they ever arrived there and it
must be assumed that Thomas died before setting out. English newspapers did not report any further exhibition appearance.

Details of Thomas Reid’s death have not been traced. Registration of infant deaths did not become obligatory until 1864. Church records in Liverpool do not record the infant’s death and it has not been possible to trace his burial place. If his burial place could be traced it might have made it possible to carry out genetic testing on a surviving tooth or other material. Genetic testing on contemporary examples of gigantism has identified an inheritable anomaly which was also identified in the 19th century skeleton of Charles Byrne in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and in contemporary Northern Ireland individuals with gigantism.3

The case of Thomas Reid must be regarded as unfinished business. The most likely explanation for his condition must be assumed to have been a pituitary tumour, which in his case was malignant and in consequence caused his early death.3

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