

Cornelius Mcgrath, the Silvermines Giant



Cornelius Mcgrath (McGrath) was born on the 10th March 1737 in the parish of the Silvermines, near Nenagh, Co Tipperary. It is said that the family lived in a small house at the crossroads in the village, later known as Siney's (where Mrs. Siney ran a little shop).

The parents and siblings of Cornelius, "were people of ordinary stature, but Cornelius, as he turned 15 years old, became seized with pains in his limbs and in the space of one year grew some 21 inches in stature".

In July 1752, when just over 15 years old, Cornelius Magrath went to Youghal, Co. Cork to receive saltwater treatment which was thought to be a cure to alleviate his growing pains. Here large crowds began to take a curious interest in this "giant". The then Bishop of Cloyne, [Dr George Berkery](#) (who died in 1753), took a keen interest in the young boys health, keeping him in his home and assisting him in his recovery.

By this time Cornelius's hands, we are told, had grown to the size of "*a shoulder of mutton, while his shoes measured some 15 inches.*" His appetite was considered quite moderate and he drank cider with his meals, to assist in alleviating his growing pains.

"*The London Magazine*" in August 1752 states (headlined "Cork July 24th").
"*There is now in this city one Cornelius McGrath, boy of 15 years, 11 months old, of a most gigantic stature, being 7 feet 9 inches three quarter high. He is clumsily made, talks boyish and simple, he comes hither from Youghal, where he has been a year going into the salt water for rheumatic pains which almost cripple him...*"

It was while in Youghal, Co. Cork, that he was persuaded to show himself off in return for money, so he headed to London in 1753 to launch his career and was first exhibited in Bristol.

Numb. 4367

The London Evening-Post.

From THURSDAY October 23, to SATURDAY October 25, 1755.

Hann, Oß. II. One Cornelius Magrath, a Lad of about eighteen Years of Age, has been, within these few Days, shewn in publick here under the Title of the English Giant. The present Height of this Youth is so extraordinary, as to admit a Man six Feet and a Half high, with his Hat on, to walk under his Arm. He is every Way proportion'd, weighing 357 lb. is very active, and grows still taller daily, having, within these four Weeks past, grown one Inch in Height.

Cornelius Magrath newspaper advert from 1755.

In an English issue of the then “*Daily Advertiser*” newspaper dated January 31st 1753, his sponsors ran the following notice:

“Just arrived in this city from Ireland, the youth, mentioned lately in the newspapers, as the most extraordinary production in nature. He is allowed by the nobility and gentry, who daily resort to see him, to have the most stupendous and gigantic form (although a boy), and is the only representation in the world of the ancient and magnificent giants of that kingdom. He is seven feet three inches in height, without shoes. His wrist measures a quarter of a yard and an inch. He greatly surpasses Cajanus the Swede, in the just proportions of his limbs; and is the truest and best proportioned figure ever seen. He was sixteen years of age the 10th of last March and is to be seen at the ‘Peacock,’ at [Charing Cross](#), from eight in the morning, till ten at night.”



Magrath went on from England to visit Paris and most of the larger cities in Europe, including Regensburg, Germany. This is where in 1756, where his portrait was engraved by Johann Nepomuk Maag, beside a Prussian grenadier—Prussians being reckoned as the tallest soldiers in Europe at the time—and McGrath towers over him.

A Venetian artist, [Pietro Longhi](#), painted Cornelius, at the age of 20 years in 1757, part of a commission for the “*Noble Gentleman Giovanni Grimandi dei Servi, Patrician of Venice.*” The painting is entitled “*True Portrait of the Giant Cornelio Magrat, the Irishman.*”

He was a fascination at “freak shows” all across Europe during the late 1750’s, however while in Flanders Magrath was forced to return to Ireland due to ill health.

Then on 17th May 1760 Cornelius Mcgrath’s death was reported by *The London Intelligencer*. Students, from nearby Trinity College, whom he had befriended, are believed to have stolen his body on the day he died. The students having dissected his body preserved his bones and the skeleton still remain in Trinity College to this day.



The South Carolina Gazette 1760 included in its reporting of Cornelius Mcgrath’s death... “....Upon his death, his body was carried to the dissecting house in the college, where his skeleton, on account of its extraordinary size, will amuse the curious, and fill posterity with wonder.”

Of the three most famous eighteenth century Irish giants, Charles Byrne and Cornelius Mcgrath died before they were twenty-four, while Patrick Cotter lived to the grand old age of forty-six. “Giants” tended not to live for very long, and, although people, quite literally, looked up to them, they were hardly treated with great respect, either in their lifetimes, or after their deaths.

There seems to be some uncertainty about Cornelius Mcgrath’s exact height, but most accounts say he was at least 7’3” at a time when men of average height would have been two feet shorter.

Cornelius was about 23 years old when he died on 17th May, 1760. The records show that his body was “donated to medical science” while others say that it was stolen by Trinity College Dublin students and taken to the Department of Anatomy, where he was duly dissected and “would amuse the curious, and fill posterity with wonder.” In 2011, the skeleton of Cornelius Magrath, was one of the exhibits on display in an exhibition marking 300 years of medicine at Trinity College’s, School of Medicine, which was founded in 1711.

Cornelius’ skeleton is still retained by Trinity College today, exhibited for anatomy students, despite many efforts to have his remains properly buried.

Breda Moloney, Silvermines

Compiled from records available on the internet.

5th June 2021.