REFLECTIONS

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THE STRANGE CASE OF THE PATAGONIAN GIANTS

A few months ago I wrote about Sir John Mandeville, the lively fourteenth-century writer whose book of travels told many a tale of purported wonders in far corners of the earth: cannibals thirty feet high, and men without heads who had their eyes in their shoulders, and the like. Mandeville, who may never have seen any of the world beyond western Europe, was essentially a medieval fantasist, writing at a time when little of our planet had been properly explored. His purpose may simply have been to entertain. But what can one say about a *real* explorer who comes back from afar and tells us a tall tale of Mandevillean wonders that he claims to have encountered in his voyaging?

Consider, if you will, the case of the Patagonian giants—a tall tale in the most literal sense—that kept Europeans buzzing for nearly three hundred years. It originated with Antonio Pigafetta, the Italian gentleman who sailed with Magellan on his pioneering voyage of circumnavigation in 1519 and was the official chronicler of the expedition. In June 1520, Pigafetta wrote, when the explorers were traveling in high latitudes along the eastern coast of what is now called South America, they came upon a strange figure of colossal size "singing and dancing on the sand." Magellan sent some men ashore to inspect him. "This man," we are told, "was so tall that our heads hardly came up to his belt. He was well formed; his face was broad and colored with red, excepting that his eyes were surrounded with yellow." Pigafetta estimated his height at about eight feet. Magellan gave him some bells, a comb, and a pair of glass beads. This encouraged other giants to appear—eventually eighteen in all, including some females, also gigantic in size. Magellan captured several to take back to Spain as curiosities, but they died soon afterward aboard his ships.

Pigafetta's account of the giants, whom Magellan called *patagones,* meaning "big feet," caused a great sensation in Europe, creating far more commotion than the successful circumnavigation itself, and thereafter every expedition to that part of the world—the name "Patagonia" having become attached to the place where they dwelled—made a point of looking for the Patagonian giants, with highly variable results.

Sir Francis Drake, the second circumnavigating voyager, saw them too in 1578, although the first account of the journey, published fifty years later, asserts that they were seven and a half feet tall at most. A Spanish captain, Pedro Sarmiento, claimed to see giants in the same area in 1580, according to the not entirely trustworthy historian of his voyage. An equally unreliable narrator, Anthony Knyvet, who accompanied the circumnavigator Thomas Cavendish in 1592, wrote of two Patagonians twelve feet tall, and a boy whose height was over nine feet. Willem Schouten and Jacob Le Maire, two Dutch circumnavigators, touched down in Patagonia in 1615 and found some graves made of heaped stones, one of which they opened and saw within it "the bones of human beings ten and eleven feet in stature." And there were other similar reports.

On the other hand, Sir John Narborough, who spent ten months on the Patagonian coast in 1670, found no giants: "The natives," he declared, "are not taller than generally Englishmen are." Seventy years later, another British expedition concluded that the Patagonians "are people of a middle stature . . . tall and well-made, being in general from five to six feet high." But the older tales of gi-

ants persisted, and some theories had it that Patagonia was inhabited by two races, one gigantic, the other of normal size.

One of the purposes of Commodore John Byron's circumnavigation of 1764-66 was to secure more information about these people. We are now well along in the eighteenth century, definitely a post-medieval era, and it is reasonable to think that Byron, a tough, experienced skipper nicknamed "Foul-Weather Jack" who was the grandfather of the poet, would have brought back reliable information. But in fact the various accounts left the situation more confused than ever.

The first news to come from the Byron expedition was contained in a letter to the minister in charge of British naval affairs, Lord Egmont, that Byron wrote from Patagonia and carried with him to London when he returned in May 1756. In it he called the Patagonians "people who in size come the nearest to giants of any people I believe in the world." He did not specify any heights. But an article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* published two days after his return asserted that they were eight and a half feet tall, and the *London Chronicle,* three months later, said, "We are informed that the giants found by Commodore Byron measured from eight feet and one half to ten feet in height, and every way stout in proportion. The men's feet measured eighteen inches."

There was great furor everywhere. The French, then locked in bitter maritime rivalry with England, insisted the tale was a hoax designed to distract attention from the fact that the British were exploring those regions in preparation for an attack on French possessions in the New World—not an implausible idea, since England was already organizing a new expedition under the command of Samuel Wallis and Philip Carteret for approximately that purpose. In 1767, the *London Chronicle* reported that Wallis and Carteret, following Byron's route, had encountered "some thousands" of giants, ranging in height from seven to eight feet. And in 1768 Charles Clarke, who had sailed as a midshipman with Byron, published an account that said of the Patagonians, "Some of them are certainly nine feet, if they do not exceed it. The commodore, who is very near six feet, could but just reach the top of one of their heads, which he attempted on tiptoe. . . . There was hardly a man there less than eight feet, most of them considerably more; the women, I believe, run from seven and a half to eight." Another account of the voyage, published anonymously in 1767 and credited to one of Byron's officers, was embellished by a striking picture of an English sailor standing beside a gigantic Patagonian couple: the Englishman seems no bigger than a child, barely waist-high next to them, and the huge woman carries a baby of immense size in her arms.

It was British policy then to impound the journals of its explorers and turn them over to professional writers to prepare for publication. Thus in 1773 appeared an account by John Hawkesworth dealing with the voyages of Byron, Carteret, and Wallis, and a later one by Captain James Cook. Here Byron is made to say of one Patagonian, "He was of gigantic nature, and seemed to realize the tales of monsters in human shape. . . . 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."

Very tall, yes, but not quite nine to twelve feet, and perhaps not worthy of the descriptive terms Hawkesworth inserted into Byron's journal: "This frightful colossus . . . These enormous goblins." And Hawkesworth's version of Wallis' journal offered a more conservative report: "As I had two measuring rods with me, we went round and measured those that appeared to be tallest among them. One of these was six feet seven inches high, several more were six feet five and six feet six inches; but the stature of the greater part of them was from five feet ten to six feet."

The full unraveling of the myth of the Patagonian giants—and that is what it was, of course, a myth—took a little longer, though. A French expedition under Louis de Bougainville made a point of looking for the giants: "We made contact with these so-famous Patagonians and found them to be no taller . . . than other men." There did seem to be a great many who were six feet tall and taller, much bigger than the average European of that era, but these were hardly colossi. Later explorers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century reported the same thing—tall people, yes, but not really giants.

Byron's own unaltered journal, when eventually published, showed that the statements in Hawkesworth's edited version were rather more vivid than the case merited. Byron had spoken of the Patagonian chief as "one of the most extraordinary men for size I had ever seen," found the average height of the people remarkable, and reported that he "never was more astonished to see such a set of people." But nowhere did he use the word "giant" or "monster," and he made no estimates of their stature. And Charles Darwin, visiting Patagonia in 1834 during his five-year round-the-world voyage of scientific research aboard *H.M.S. Beagle,* provided the final blow to the old Pigafetta-Sarmiento-Knyvet tale: "We had an interview . . . with the famous so-called gigantic Patagonians, who gave us a cordial reception. Their height appears much greater than it really is, from their large guanaco mantles, their long flowing hair, and general figure: on an average their height is about six feet, with some men taller and only a few shorter; and the women are also tall; altogether they are certainly the tallest race we anywhere saw." Taller than most Europeans, at any rate, but scarcely worthy of inclusion in any Mandevillean book of wonders. Nor has anyone seen giants in Patagonia ever since. In 1879, the explorer Ramon Lista studied a tribe of two or three thousand people known as the Tehuelches, and found the average height of their men to be six feet two, certainly impressive enough. But the Teheuelches were largely wiped out a year later in an Argentinian military raid following an uprising, and few inhabitants of Patagonia today are above the current human norms of size.

What was it all about, then?

To the voyagers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the average height of an adult European male was just over five feet, the Patagonians surely must have looked very large, as, to any child, all adults seem colossal. Then, too, an element of understandable human exaggeration must have entered these accounts of men who had traveled so far and endured so much, and the natural wish not to be outdone by one's predecessors helped to produce these repeated fantasies of Goliaths ten feet tall or even more. And in Commodore Byron's time the British Admiralty may well have had political motives for encouraging the French to focus on fantastic tales of giants instead of examining what these British mariners might really have been up to in the South Seas. So the Patagonian giants appear to have been the product of awe, poor judgment of heights, and, to some extent, deliberate fabrication.

Too bad. I'm looking right now at that 1767 plate of the tiny Englishman standing next to the huge, hulking Patagonian man and woman, and I can't help but feel stirred by the wonder of the scene, the majesty of those two Brobdingnagian figures towering over the astounded mariner. If I, twenty-first-century man living in this scientific age, can yearn for the existence of gigantic beings somewhere on this planet, how much easier it must have been for our ancestors, ever so much more credulous, to accept with delight these tall tales of tall people in the uttermost part of the earth. ❍