

## The Cape Breton Giant

ANGUS MacASKILL was born in 1825 at Harris on the Island of Lewis, one of the Hebrides Islands off the coast of Scotland. Angus was probably between three and six years old when his family sailed across the Atlantic to settle on the south shore of St. Ann's Harbour.

In pioneer communities, times were difficult and most articles had to be made by hand. As Angus kept growing larger he became very helpful to his father but it also became necessary to enlarge the dimensions of the home. The giant needed a giant-sized bed too, and this was 8 feet long, with ropes lashed across it on which a straw or feather mattress might be



Angus ( 7 ft. 9 in. ) with Parson Taylor ( 6 ft. )



Giant MacAskill with "Major" Nutt, a midget with whom he travelled.

placed. This bed and his large chair may be seen at the Giant MacAskill-Highland Pioneer's Museum at the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts at St. Ann's.

MacAskill's parents were of average size as were his nine brothers and three sisters. As a mature man he is reported to have had the following dimensions:

Height.....7'9"

Width of shoulder.....44"

Weight.....425 lbs.

Palm of hand..width.... 8"

length...12"

Despite his huge height he was perfectly proportioned with fine rippling muscles. He had deep-set blue eyes and a musical, if somewhat hollow sounding voice. He was always willing and more than able to lend a helping hand wherever needed.

His good humour often led to practical jokes either by others on him or vice versa. For example, one day a group of fishermen were struggling to draw their fish-laden boat up onto the shore; Angus, passing by at that moment, offered to help by pulling the bow while the others pushed upon the stern. The fishermen clustered around the stern as suggested but instead of pushing they decided to play a trick on Angus and thus put all their strength into pulling in the opposite direction...there was a sound of rending wood as the boat was torn in half.

Hard times in Cape Breton forced Angus to leave in 1848 on a series of tours through Canada, the United States, West Indies and Europe, during which he amazed and delighted thousands with his feats of strength and kindly manner. While in London, he had an audience with Queen Victoria who "presented him with two gold rings and acclaimed him as the tallest, stoutest, and strongest man that ever entered the palace." The Public Archives of Nova Scotia has an advertising flyer issued by Angus' agent, Mr. Dunseith, advertising two Levees daily for Giant Angus M'KasKill at the Mason's Hall in Halifax.

Due to his superior height and strength he was often involved in wagers concerning his weight lifting abilities. What might be considered as his greatest wager led to tragedy. While in New York some bystanders on a pier bet that he would be unable to lift a huge rusty anchor weighing about 2700 pounds. With the strain of mighty muscles he sat the anchor on his shoulder and walked with it. In replacing it on the pier the mass of metal slipped and one of the flukes slashed across his body pinning him beneath it as it crashed downwards. Resulting internal injuries kept him from ever again standing absolutely erect and rising from a chair often caused him great pain.

After his accident he returned to St. Ann's where he started a successful store and grist mill at Englishtown. By times his great strength seemed to return as he often turned his own mill wheel when the water was low. On August 8th, 1863, he passed away quietly after a week of illness.

The coffin had to be especially made and was of pine boards, lined with costly white cloth and had a half glass top. His grave may be seen at Englishtown in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

Further information may be obtained from Phyllis R. Blakeley's book, Nova Scotia's Two Remarkable Giants, published by Lancelot Press, Windsor; 1970.