

Angus MacAskill, the Cape Breton Giant:

Angus MacAskill died in his sleep on August 8, 1863. Seven years later James D. Gillis was born. In 1898, Gillis began gathering information for what would become the main biography on MacAskill. Published in 1926, it remains the only lengthy biography on the Cape Breton Giant, though a better, briefer book on his life was offered by Phyllis R. Blakeley in 1970, entitled, Two Remarkable Giants. Other than these two books, only occasional articles have appeared in the muscle mags over the years. It is a confusing story.

In the July 1961 issue of Iron Man magazine, editor Peary Kader suggested that author Robert Nealey could "bring us a story sometime" about the Nova Scotian Giant, Angus MacAskill. Eight issues of Iron Man later, Nealey indeed brought us a story of a man who stood 7'9" tall, who weighed more than 400 muscular pounds, and whose bi-deltoid width was 44" (which is wider than two normal size men standing side by side). The tale told by Nealey, like the stories before it, and like those after it published in other muscle magazines, made for fascinating reading... and for questions. The most recent muscle magazine article about MacAskill was published in 1975. By comparing the two books on his life and the several articles featuring him- which appeared from 1936 to 1975, we can ascertain that John Grimek was correct when in the March issue of Muscular Development magazine 1970, he wrote that yes, Angus had existed, but that the stories concerning his legendary strength, "like Scotch whiskey get better with age". In fact, some of the authors seem to have been intoxicated with exaggerations.

It is generally agreed that Angus McAskill (later spelled MacAskill) was born in a town named Harris on the island in the Hebrides chain called Lewis in 1825. One writer declares the date was almost a year to the day before Stephen Foster was born, so Angus was probably born near July 4, 1825. At the age of six (one account says age three), the MacAskill family moved to Nova Scotia, where they began life anew at Cape Breton. We are not given a listing of brothers and sisters in order, but are informed there were nine brothers and three sisters.

From Cape Breton, Angus would venture to world fame with P.T. Barnum, and would visit Queen Victoria in England- at least that's what most accounts would have us believe. But the facts do not appear to support either claim.

(an aside: those of us interested in matters of muscle and strength are known to seek the limits of performance whether of muscle size or amount of weight lifted. And, often, common sense seems to become clouded in the chalk dust on the lifter's hands. Concerning MacAskill, an explanation of a couple of photographs can help bring us back to cleared thinking.)

With Nealey's article in Iron Man July 1961 is a photograph showing Angus standing next to a minister who is described as 6'3" tall. We are not shown a full length photo, but assuming both men are standing on the same level, the minister's head is at the same height as the giant's mid-chest region. In Muscle Mag International September 1974 the statue of MacAskill in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is shown with author Dale Gorveatt standing next to it for comparison. Two months later Gorveatt wrote a similar article for Muscular Development and again posed with the statue as did his brother Giane who is 5'7" tall. National Geographic in May 1940 on page 601 shows a man "of average

height" wearing some of Angus MacAskill's clothing. Angus' boot is described as 14½" in length and the coat is so large on the man wearing it so as to remind us of a small boy playing in his father's clothing. This photo is worth looking up at your library.

What about the other measurements of Angus MacAskill? His height is always given as 7'9". Even the information sheet from the Nova Scotia Tourist Information Office agrees to that measurement. The other measurements given for Angus vary greatly from account to account. His weight for example, understandably varied during his adult life from 400 to 500 pounds, with Gillis saying "more than 500 lbs". His chest size is relayed as "around 70" or "something like 80". The palm of his hand (the palm!) was 6" wide and 12" long, though the Tourist Office says it was 8" wide! So, considering most of us have a middle finger equal in length to our palm length, are we to believe that his hand was 24" long?

Five years before Nealey's article appeared in Iron Man, David P. Willoughby, strength historian, mentioned Angus in his excellent series of articles called The Kings of Strength, which appeared in Iron Man. Willoughby usually checked all sources for accuracy in regard to lifting, and I dare say no one would challenge his detail in body measurements or lifting calculations. But in the half page article devoted to MacAskill in July 1956, DPW apparently took at face value reports that MacAskill had been associated with P.T. Barnum and that Angus had an audience with Queen Victoria. Neither situation can be substantiated, as we'll see later. But DPW in his evaluation of the physique of MacAskill said that the reported 44" wide shoulders were more likely 27" - a fact made more evident remembering that the casket Angus is buried in is 30" wide; the biceps were probably 21" around, not 26"; and that the chest circumference was likely 60", certainly not 80". DPW then lists some of the lifting feats ascribed to Angus and concludes that he, DPW, did not "believe a word of it". After we make some examinations of the various lifts, we must concur. Indeed, most feats attributed to Angus must be placed in a category with the lift a reader of Muscular Development submitted for John Grimek's consideration wherein Angus could "lift plowhorses over fences for fun". This is where Grimek used the Scotch whiskey analogy.

Many of the lifts ascribed to Angus MacAskill seem extraordinary upon hearing and remain so after examination. All of the lifts are described by various authors with differing poundages, locations, and ease of lifting. In relating some of the more famous of his supposed lifts, I shall not include all the differing details, but will mention some to point out how the same lift can be so distorted in the re-telling through the years.

Feats of Strength Attributed to Angus MacAskill:

1. One of the earlier strength feats attributed to teenager Angus was when he and his father and brothers were sawing wood. Rough cut large logs were in those days lifted by four men into position about seven feet above the ground and placed into cross supports so they could be sawed. Taking a meal break from this work, Angus wanted some of the wine which was being passed around at the table. His father refused to allow Angus to share in the drink so Angus left the table in anger, returned to the worksite and removed the log from the 7' resting place, putting the log on the ground. Father

and brothers soon returned to resume work and seeing the log removed, accused Angus of having help in the mischief. As proof of his lone involvement, the teenager lifted the log back up into place. Other versions of this story omit mentioning the brothers and/or have Angus lifting the log first, not replacing it. So many variables are involved here it is difficult to assess this lift. How heavy was the log? What was its diameter and its length? A height of 7 feet would be at about Angus' chin level, so he could have grabbed one end of the log and "walked it up" moving toward the center, placing the log on his upper back and arising from a squatting position, jerked the weight(log) onto the supports. This feat is possible, but too many details are missing.

2. One afternoon, Angus was busy plowing a field using two horses (or two oxen, another version says) when one of the animals became ill, making it seem unlikely that Angus would win the wager he had made with a friend that Angus could complete the plowing of that field that afternoon. Angus stepped into the harness, and as his father guided the depth of the plow, Angus and the healthy horse plowed for two hours. His mother happened by, saw the insanity and begged Angus to stop; and in deference to his mother's wishes, he did. Later, he paid the lost wager. Those readers who have worked in the fields do not need me to tell them this never happened. A man of MacAskill's size and strength may have been able to plow for a few feet but for two hours!

3. When the two horses pulling the wagon toward his father's farm would not move fast enough to please Angus, he unhitched them, tied them to the rear of the wagon, and pulled the load home by himself. Another version says he simply let the horses run free to find their way home, but horses were valuable in those pre-tractor days and this is unlikely. Again, missing details. How heavy was the loaded wagon; was the pull downhill, on level terrain? Unlikely. The animals on the MacAskill farm did not need to form a labor union; they just slacked off knowing Angus would replace them!

4. Angus is reputed to have pulled in a four man fishing net which the four men could not pull. Maybe all the fish started swimming toward shore.

5. Once, a bully insisted on a fight with the gentle MacAskill. Angus asked to shake the man's hand before the fight began, and in the powerful grip, crushed the man's hand causing it to spurt blood. This is possible (to crush a man's hand) but one wonders why the hand would bleed externally.

6. The wind was blowing the heavy snow. It was cold. Medical help was 25 miles away for the 190 lb friend of Angus MacAskill, so Angus picked the man up and walked those miles without ever setting the man down. Assuming Angus weighed 500 lbs, this man would represent 38% of his bodyweight. (if you weigh 200 lbs, a similar feat would involve 76 lbs) This trek was performed so effortlessly that Gillis reporting this (or a similar) incident says that when Angus did put the man down after the 25 miles, the man's weight had been so insignificant to Angus that Angus did not even notice a weight had been taken from his shoulders! One wonders how far Angus would have to carry such a load before he realized he had a load?

7. During a wrestling match with a 200 lb opponent, Angus threw the man over a woodpile 10' high and 12' wide. The woodpile would be at about the same height as the overhead reach of MacAskill, so since this man was 40% of Angus bodyweight, this would be a possible feat, but probably not in the manner described by one writer who says the wrestler was hurled clear of the woodpile like a missile. More likely, the wrestler bounced along the top of the woodpile.

8. Some boatmen had taken rocks from Angus' property without his permission. As they were in their boat to leave, Angus instructed them to return the rocks; they refused, and Angus threw a stone at their boat damaging it so badly, the men did return to shore. Details? How large a boat, how much did the stone weigh, how far did he throw the stone? Unlikely.

9. One of the more incredible lifts attributed to Angus was a lateral raise using a pinch grip with two fingers on the corner of a 100 lb bag of sugar and holding this weight straight out from the shoulder- for ten minutes! Now, come on. Only a few men have been able to approach success with a 100 lb holdout and that was with a well-gripped dumbbell, not two fingers on a sack corner. These men could hold the weight straight out for one second, and here we have a man who can perform a much much harder feat for 600 seconds? This is absurd. Get a weight which is 20% of your bodyweight, wrap it in a towel, pinch the towel with two fingers, and see how long you can hold it straight out from the shoulder.

10. Being thirsty, Angus lifted a full 140 gallon puncheon of wine (or beer) up to his lips and drank from the bunghole, easily. Wine weighs a little more than seven pounds per gallon, and adding the weight of a 140 gallon container, we are describing a liquid lift, slowly controlled, of over 1000 lbs. If you have ever tried to maneuver a 55 gallon drum of liquid, you realize the awkwardness involved here. I have lifted many 55 gallon drums when they were 10% full of dormant oil- no I did not drink the dormant oil, I poured it into an orchard sprayer. Also, the length of a 140 gallon container would mean the lifter's arms would have to be straight out in front for all possible leverage. Of course, this would be no problem for someone who was able to hold 100 lbs one handed as described in # 9 above....

11. Finally, the Anchor Incident. This story is always included by authors writing about Angus MacAskill. Details vary greatly, but either in NYC or Boston, or New Orleans, Angus approached an anchor lying on the dock. The anchor weighed between 1200 lbs and 2700 lbs (I told you details varied); it did or it did not have the anchor chain attached. He either lifted it onto his shoulder and walked a few feet, or one hundred yards; or he lifted it overhead easily, or strained until his veins nearly burst. But all stories agree that in lowering the weight, one of the flukes struck Angus and injured him permanently. He was not able to stand erect easily after that, so it is interesting that one author places the plowing incident (see #2) after this anchor feat.

There are other feats which Angus has sometimes been given credit for. If interested please see For Further Reading on one of the following pages.

Angus MacAskill As A Performer:

Gillis says in his book that a "man from New York" came to Cape Breton and hired Angus to put himself on display. This was 1849, and authors have assumed that man to be P.T. Barnum, though Gillis never names the man. Interestingly, Angus was displayed as a giant, not as a strongman. Blakeley identifies the man as Mr. Dunseith who was captain of a Yankee ship which often did business at St. Ann's. And Blakeley, in her excellently researched book Two Remarkable Giants, mentions that Albert Almon, the Cape Breton historian, in doing some research for some articles which appeared in the Cape Breton Mirror, concluded that MacAskill may have appeared as a curiosity in Barnum's New York or Philadelphia museums, but Barnum never mentions Angus, and Almon says the photograph of MacAskill holding Tom Thumb in his palm was the result of a photographer's combining the negatives of two separate pictures, so that actually there is no photographic evidence that Angus and Thumb ever worked together.

Angus and Queen Victoria:

It is well documented that Tom Thumb had three audiences with Queen Victoria; it is not documented that Angus ever met her. Indeed, remembering that the going rate for admission to see either a dwarf or a giant around 1850 in England was one penny, one wonders why the Queen would have been curious about Angus. She was probably anxious to see Thumb, on the other hand, because of the masterful publicity campaign staged by P. T. Barnum. Neil Harris in his 1973 book Hum-Bug, the Art of P.T. Barnum mentions that Thumb "fought mimic battles with Barnum's giants" but does not mention any giants by name, and please notice he is describing 1844, not 1849. In January 1844, Barnum and Thumb set sail for England. Perhaps it was necessary for Barnum to go along so that the Queen would be guaranteed to see the real Tom Thumb and not one of the other twenty small men claiming to be Thumb in their various appearances around England at that time. And, as circus buffs know, Barnum did not have his own circus during the lifetime of Angus MacAskill, so it would have on that fact been impossible for Angus to work with "Barnum's circus".

Obviously, if Angus never had an audience with the Queen, the story of him stomping his foot hard on the hardwood floor leaving a dent is fictitious. (another version says Angus walked on his heels around the room twisting and cutting pieces of carpet) So where Angus' brother got the idea that Queen Victoria gave Angus a Highland Costume, perhaps we'll never know.. And perhaps, and this is a guess on my part, some of the men claiming to be brothers of Angus MacAskill around 1926 were in fact imposters. Consider this: In 1926 when the book by Gillis was published, four of Angus' brothers and two of his sisters were still living. Really? Interesting!, considering that father MacAskill died at age 98 in 1881 and mother MacAskill died eight years before that at age 80. So generously assuming that mother MacAskill had her last child at age 50 (a generous assumption, you must agree), the children living in 1926 would have to range in age from 83 to 88. Unlikely.

The End of Angus:

Apparently after the anchor mishap, Angus returned to St. Ann's to run a store and a grist mill, where he spent his remaining days. He died in August 1863 following a week of illness, and was buried in Englishtown.

postscript: some friends having just returned (June 1985) from the MacAskill Museum in connection with the Gaelic College in Nova Scotia, have these thoughts and impressions about the museum: It is located in a basement room and on display are the coat belonging to MacAskill- which my friends say was approximately 30" wide at the shoulders (a guess on their part); a shoe, whose length was not extraordinary at all; a drawing of Angus and Tom Thumb, which seems to be not of the two men together, though the drawings are placed in such a position and manner to suggest this togetherness; and a plastic or wooden replica of the anchor which Angus lifted.

For Further Reading: