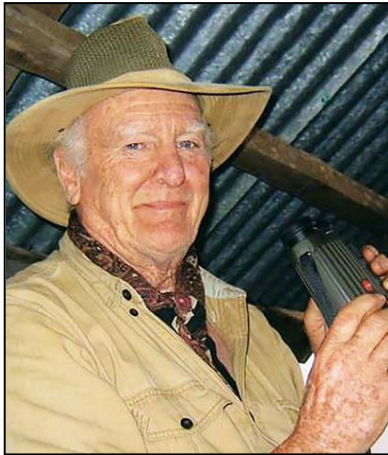


News

IN MEMORIAM: PETER BYRNE



The Essential Bigfoot Hunter: A Personal Remembrance of Peter Byrne. Peter Cyril Byrne died on July 28, 2023, at the age of 97, in Tillamook, Oregon. Several obituaries appear on-line, and his life is parsed both on his own website www.Petercbyrne.com/ and on his Wikipedia page. A helpful precis of his stature as a Bigfoot researcher, including storied battles, rivalries, and warts, appears in the September 2023 issue of *Bigfoot Times* www.bigfoottimes.net: "Peter C. Byrne: 1925-2023" by the editor, Daniel Perez.

My interest in the Sasquatch phenomenon was sparked first by the usual adolescent reading of cryptozoological classics, then importantly re-ignited by Professor of Anthropology Bill Holm at the University of Washington in the late nineteen-sixties.

Holm, the leading authority on Northwest Indian culture and art, emphasized in his memorable classes that, of living Native Americans that he personally knew, among those living still near woods and waters, virtually none failed to harbor a belief in the *Bukwus/Dzonoqua* figures as living, physical creatures. This spurred trips to Mt. St. Helens and surrounds, the font of so many early Bigfoot reports, on one of which I experienced sounds not in the vocabularies of any mammals or birds I knew (and I was studying them with Frank Richardson, leading mammalogist/ornithologist at the university) and which resembled descriptions of Bigfoot calls given by several Indian groups.

In the summer of 1975, conducting my doctoral research on Washington butterfly ecogeography, I came across the Bigfoot Information Center in The Dalles, Oregon. Upon entering I was greeted by this khaki-clad, British-accented character who introduced himself as Peter Byrne. From that initial visit, besides his imperial charisma, I recall a high quality of interpretation in the exhibits, and being impressed by the rigorous dictum of his motto (and, presumably, M.O.): "When in doubt, throw it out." Based on that and his conversation, which I found to be intelligent, penetrating, and relatively scientific, I determined to invite him back to Yale to make a presentation. I was on the seminar committee for the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. This was a definite departure from the usual run of talks, which might include "Biomass vs. Diversity in Current Logging Practices," but did not address monsters. Nonetheless, everyone went for it and agreed to fund Peter's visit to New Haven. However, while seminar speakers normally required only the approval of the Dean of the School, I was obliged to get Yale's Vice President Henry Chauncey Jr. to sign off on Peter Byrne, which he did. The big, mixed audience of students, staff, and faculty came from forestry, biology, anthropology, archaeology, paleontology, and divinity. Peter spoke with charm, humor, and a gentle authority, showed Patterson-Gimlin, and fielded the usual objections. Overall, he was riveting. Afterward, I was struck to see this barrelful of Yale's most distinguished primatologists and anthropologists

actually scratching their heads, unwilling to discount Bigfoot outright to the press. I don't suppose Peter converted anyone that day, but he did leave behind many open minds—a rare feat for iconoclasts in academia—and mine, open wider.

My next substantial contact with Peter came during my Guggenheim Fellowship-sponsored investigation into the cultural and scientific substance of the Bigfoot phenomenon, as both a literary and biological project. I interviewed Peter several times in the nineties, watched him interact with his peers at major gatherings, and read much of what he had written. I share much more about Peter than there is room for here, in my subsequent book, *Where Bigfoot Walks: Crossing the Dark Divide* (Houghton Mifflin, 1995; Counterpoint Press, 2017). I could not have written the book as it is without Peter's tutelage, input, opinion, and encouragement. He has 33 entries in the index, more than almost any other subject besides the animal itself. Yet the book is no hagiography for Byrne, who was no saint. I recognized his liabilities, and the animosity among his colleagues, some of them truly hateful. I think a lot of that came from Texas oilman Tom Slick's appointment of Peter, as an outsider, to lead the first major Bigfoot expedition in northern California; and from his subsequent ability to attract funding, whether from Slick, the Academy of Applied Science (which also funded Sir Peter Scott's search for the Loch Ness plesiosaur), or elsewhere. There was also a lot of jealousy: Byrne was handsome, confiding, charming, glib, and beloved of women. Most Bigfooters are not these things.

Peter was also fun, even in absentia. Of his 16 books, his most beloved is his first, *The Search for Bigfoot: Monster, Myth, or Man?* For my money, there are few better campfire reads than this. To share a campfire with him, as I did too infrequently, is even better. Or a wee dram: when I returned from my month in Washington's wild Dark Divide, to cap my study, I very soon invited Peter to my home to debrief. I told him of the dramatic encounter on my final night in the wilderness (perfectly portrayed in the concluding scene of *The Dark Divide*, the feature film adapted from the book (<https://darkdividefilm.com/>). When I confided in Peter, over said dram, that I had skedaddled smartly when something struck the top of my car just when I thought I was near contact, he gently chided me. "Why did I turn tail" I asked him, "when I knew it was no threat?" "Things that go bump in the night," said Peter, turning his glass toward mine. "I've had that feeling when tracking the pugmarks of a large black leopard in the Indian dusk." That seemed to me an altogether better reason for getting spooked; maybe that's the difference between tiger guides and butterfly hunters.

In later years, Peter and I stayed in close touch. I visited him and his loving wife Cathy Griffin in their riverside retreat at Pacific City, Oregon, and in the nearby town tavern. I accompanied him to seek a favorite Bowie knife in a wicked willow swamp; dined with him and a Border Patrol man-tracker colleague at Carson Hot Springs; took part in further Patterson-Gimlin film analysis and Forest Service collaboration; and shared a charmed campfire or two with him and Bob Gimlin. And when Peter, Professor Jeff Meldrum, and I all spoke at a major Bigfoot exhibition of the Washington Historical Society, which the State Historian had opposed, we ushered in the most popular exhibit in the museum's history. Peter kept his hand in Bigfoot studies until the end. I don't know whether he fully appreciated Jeff Meldrum's description of the ichnospecies *Anthropoidipes ameriborealis*, arguably the most important paper in the entire field; but I do know that he never gave up hope. Peter is often referred to as one of "the four horsemen" of Bigfoot studies, along with Green, Dahinden, and Krantz. But to me, if Elvis was the King of Rock'n'Roll, Peter Byrne was the King of Bigfoot: *the Essential Bigfoot Hunter*.

Robert Michael Pyle, Ph.D.



